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Dragon's Gate
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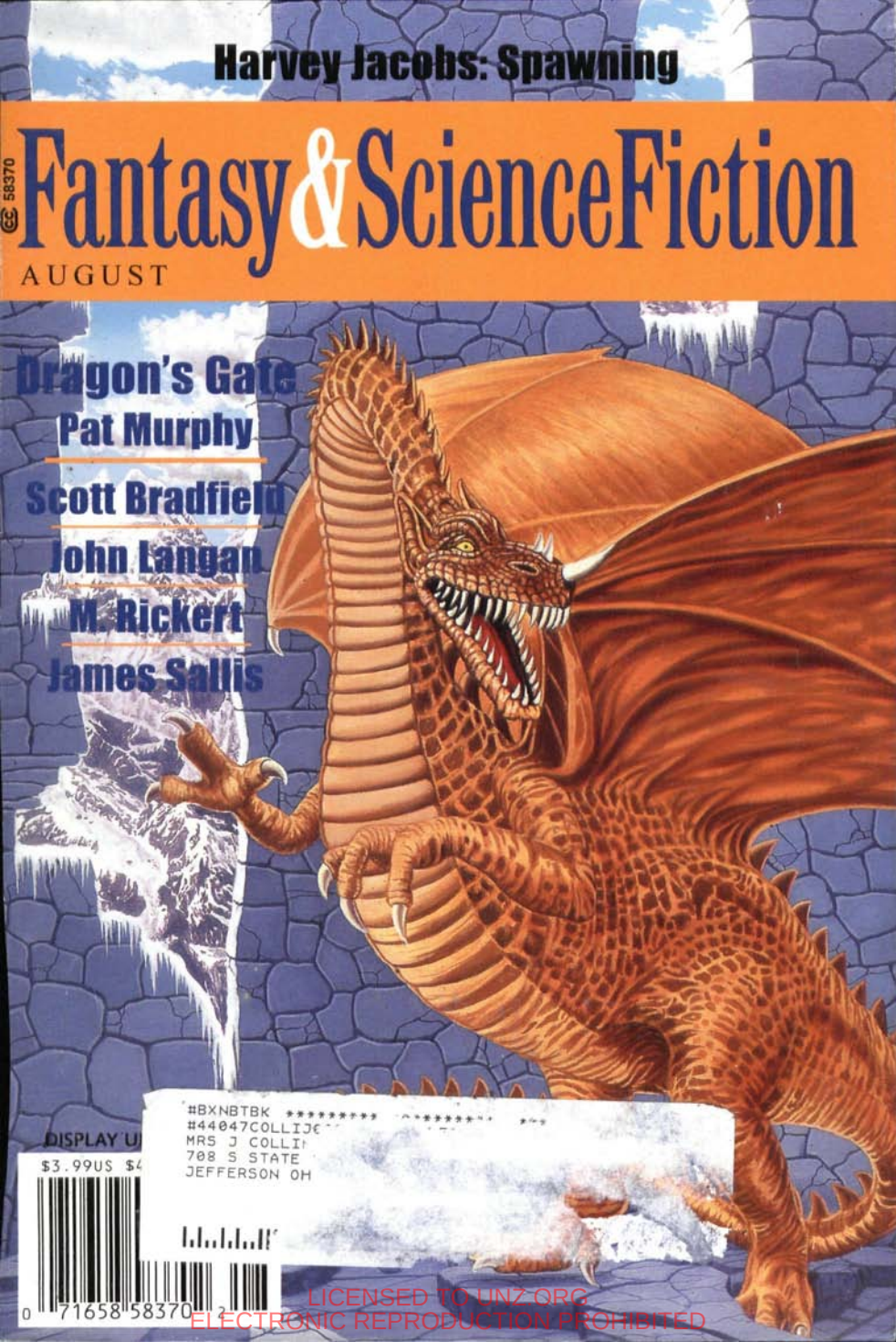

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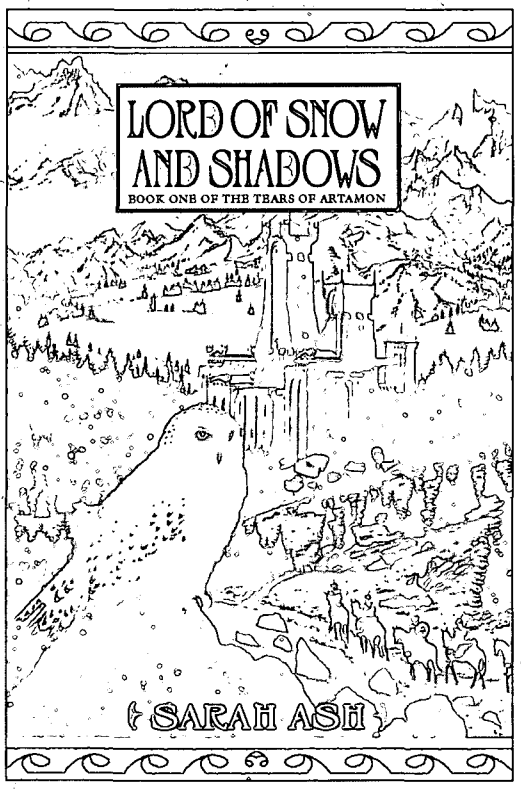

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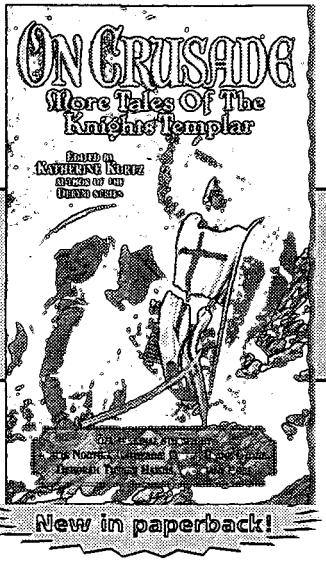

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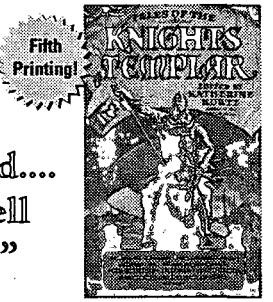

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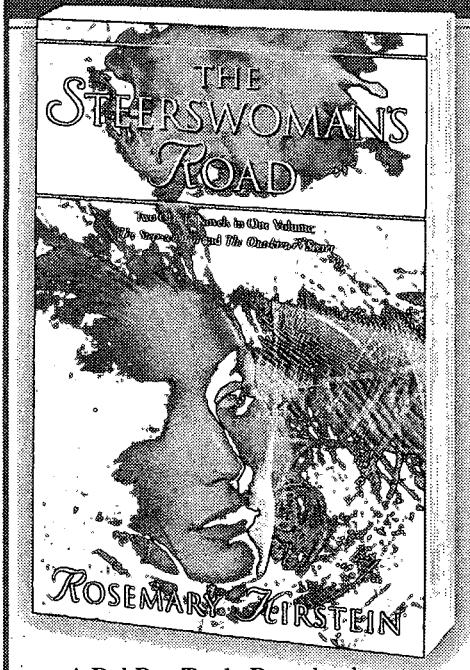

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Pat Murphy is the author of such novels as The Falling Woman, Nadya, *and* The City, Not Long After. *She works in the Bay Area for the Exploratorium and coauthors one of our regular science columns (we expect to have a new column from her and Paul Doherty next month on surfing). Her most recent books include* Adventures in Time and Space with Max Merriwell *and a revised version of her first novel,* The Shadowhunter.

Last winter was harsher than usual through much of the U.S., so we saved this one for summer when we could all look more fondly upon ice and snow. Those of you reading this story in the southern hemisphere needn't wait six months to enjoy it, however.

Dragon's Gate

By Pat Murphy

MY NAME IS ALITA, WHICH means "girl to be trusted." My mother calls me Al. If anyone asks, I tell them it's short for Alonzo, a solid masculine name. At fifteen years of age, I can pass for a boy on the verge of manhood. I dress in men's clothing, preferring tunic and breeches to petticoats and skirts.

My mother plays the harp and sings ballads; I am a storyteller. I know common folk stories (rife with bawdy asides and comic characters), heroic tales favored by the nobility (usually involving handsome princes, beautiful princesses, and courtly love), and morality tales (favored by the clergy, but not by many others). I know how a story should go.

The story that I tell you now is unruly and difficult. It refuses to conform to any of the traditional forms. This story wanders like sheep without a shepherd. It involves a prince and a dragon, but not until later. There will be magic and wishes and...well, I'll get to all that presently.

I begin my story in the mountain town of Nabakhri, where shepherds and weavers gather each fall. The shepherds come down from the mountains

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to sell their wool; the weavers come up from the lowlands to buy. My mother and I come to the festival to entertain the lot of them.

Twilight was falling when my mother and I reached the town. We had been traveling for two days, beginning our journey in the warm valley where the Alsi River ran. There, people grew rice and millet and wore bright colorful clothing. In Nabakhri, people grew barley and potatoes, herded goats and sheep, and wore heavy woolen clothing.

The trail that led to town was steep, better suited for goats than for our pony. The evening breeze blew from the great glacier that filled the valley to the west of Nabakhri. Our pony's breath made clouds in the cold, crisp air.

At the edge of town, we waited for a flock of sheep to cross the main path. The sheep bleated in protest as dogs nipped at their heels. One of the shepherds, an older man in a ragged cloak, glanced at us. He smiled as he noted my mother's harp, slung on the side of our pony's pack. "Musicians!" he said. "Are you looking for an inn?"

I nodded. After the long summer alone in the mountains, shepherds are eager for music and good company.

"The inns in the center of the village are full," he said. "Try Sarasri's place. West side of the village, overlooking the glacier. Good food, good drink."

Someone shouted from the direction in which the man's flock was disappearing. The man lifted a hand in farewell and hurried after his sheep.

Sarasri's was a sprawling, ramshackle inn on the edge of town. We hitched the pony by the open door to the tavern, where the air was rich with the scent of lamb stew and fried bread. The barmaid called for Sarasri, the innkeeper.

Sarasri, a stout, round-faced woman, hurried from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron. In the lowlands, it's unusual for a woman to run an inn, but women from the mountain tribes often go into business for themselves.

"We're looking for a room," I said, but she was shaking her head before the words were out of my mouth.

"Alas, young fellow, there are too many travelers this year," she said. "I don't know that there's a room left anywhere in town."

My mother was not listening. She was looking past Sarasri into the

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tavern. "What do you think I should play tonight, Al?" she asked me. "It looks like there'll be quite a crowd." She smiled at Sarasri — my mother has a smile that could melt the snow on a mountaintop ten miles distant. "You have such a lovely inn," she said warmly and sincerely.

My mother is warm-hearted and guileless — traits that serve her in good stead. When my father read fortunes with the Tarot cards, my mother was always represented by the Fool, a young man in motley who is about to dance over the edge of a cliff. The Fool is a divine innocent, protected by angels. If he tripped over the cliff's edge, he would fall into a haystack.

Sarasri glanced at my mother. "You are musicians? It would be nice to have music in the tavern tonight." She frowned, thinking hard. "I do have one small room...."

The room was used for storage — burlap sacks of potatoes and baskets filled with wool were stacked against one wall. The remaining space was barely big enough for a bed and a table. The window overlooked the glacier — at least we would not wake in the morning to the clamor of the village.

"Good enough?" I asked my mother.

"This is just wonderful." My mother would be comfortable in a stable stall, as long as she had her harp to play.

My father, a conjurer skilled at illusions and fortune telling, had died three years ago, when I was a girl of twelve. After his death, it fell to me to attend to practical details of life, as my mother was ill-suited to such a task. I did my best to take care of her.

When the weather was warm, we traveled from town to town. Wherever there was a festival, we performed in the taverns, passing the hat for our keep. In the cold months, we stayed in the lowlands, in the small village where my mother was born.

That evening, in Sarasri's tavern, my mother sang for an appreciative (and drunken) crowd of shepherds. Following my mother's performance, I told the tale of King Takla and the ice woman. With the glacier so near, I thought it appropriate to tell a story about the ice women.

Ice women are, of course, cousins of the river women. River women, as every lowlander knows, are magical creatures that take the form of beautiful maidens with green eyes and long hair the color of new leaves. Ice women are just as beautiful, but their eyes are as blue as the ice in the deep glacial caves and their hair is as white as new snow. Just as the river

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women inhabit the rivers, the ice women live in the high mountain glaciers.

King Takla, the ruler of a small kingdom high in the mountains, was hunting for mountain goats when he found a woman sleeping in a hollow in the glacier. She lay on the bare ice, covered with a white shawl woven of wool as fine and delicate as the first splinters of winter frost on the stones of the mountain. Only her beautiful face was exposed to the cold mountain air.

Takla recognized that she was not an ordinary woman. He knew, as all the hill folks know, that taking an ice woman's shawl gave a man power over her. He snatched up the shawl, revealing the ice woman's naked body. Ah, she was beautiful. Her skin was as smooth and pale as the ice on which she rested. Her face was that of a sleeping child, so innocent and pure.

Takla hid the shawl in his hunting pack. Then, captivated by the woman's beauty, Takla lay beside her on the ice, kissing her pale face, caressing her naked breasts, stroking her thighs.

When she woke and stared at him with cool blue eyes, he spoke to her, saying "You will be my queen, beautiful one." Though she struggled to escape, he grasped her arms and pulled her close to him. Overcome with passion for this pale maiden, he forced himself upon her.

Then Takla wrapped her in his hunting cloak and took her back to his castle to become his queen. He dressed her in fine clothing and adorned her with glittering gems. Her beauty surpassed that of any mortal woman, but she never smiled and she seldom spoke. When she did, her voice was as soft as the sound of wind-blown ice crystals whispering over the snow.

"I must go home," she told Takla. "My mother will miss me. My sisters will miss me."

"You have a husband now," he told her. "Your mother will get over it. And if your sisters are as beautiful as you are, they must come to court and find husbands here." He kissed her pale face.

There are different ways one could tell this tale. In the tavern, I told it from King Takla's point of view, describing the ice woman's beauty, the allure of her naked body. A magical being captivates a man against his will. She is a lovely temptress. Unable to control his passion, the man takes possession of her.

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In this version of the story, King Takla is helpless, a strong man stricken by love. In this version, Takla is an honest man in his way — he marries the ice woman, takes her for his queen. What more could any woman want?

I think that the ice woman would tell a very different version of the story. She was sleeping peacefully, bothering no one, when the king raped and abducted her, taking her away from her home and her sisters.

This version of the story would not be as popular in the tavern, but I think about it often, particularly when we perform in a tavern filled with soldiers. I am aware that my mother is a beautiful woman and that the soldiers admire more than her music. Because I dress as a young man, I avoid the soldiers' leers.

Of course, the tale of King Takla does not end with his capture of the ice woman. A man who takes a magical creature to his bed must face the consequences of his action.

After Takla brought the ice woman to his castle, blue-white lights flickered over the ice fields at night. The glacier moaned and creaked as the ice shifted and people said that the ice women were talking among themselves. A year passed and the ice woman bore King Takla a son — a sturdy child with his father's red hair and his mother's piercing blue eyes.

Not long after his son's birth, King Takla went hunting alone in the mountains. While following a path that led beside the glacier, he saw a white mountain goat, standing a hundred yards away on the ice. He shot an arrow, and the beast fell.

Takla made his way across the ice to where the goat had stood. But when he reached the place where the goat had fallen, he found nothing but ice. A trick of the ice women, he thought, and turned to retrace his steps to the rocky mountain slope. A tall woman with white hair blocked his way.

"King Takla," she said. "You must set my daughter free."

Takla studied the woman. This woman was older than his wife, but just as beautiful. The same fair features, the same piercing blue eyes, the same beautiful body.

"Your daughter is my wife and the mother of my son," he said.

"I will reward you handsomely if you let her go," said the woman. She held out a silver hunting horn. "Release my daughter and sound the horn

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— and I will come and grant you a wish. Three times I will come when the horn is sounded and three wishes I will grant." She held the instrument up so that the king could admire its fine workmanship and contemplate what wishes he might make.

Takla studied the horn and considered the woman's offer. He had, over the passing year, grown weary of his wife's unsmiling silence. Yes, she was beautiful, but he had begun to admire one of his wife's ladies in waiting, a fiery beauty with auburn hair and dark brown eyes. If he accepted the ice woman's offer, his wife would return to her people, leaving him free to marry again. With the ice woman's help, he could become more powerful.

Takla smiled and took the horn from the woman's hand. She stepped aside and he returned to his castle.

He took his wife's white shawl from the trunk where it had been hidden for the past year. When he entered his wife's chambers, she was suckling his infant son. She saw the shawl in his hands and her blue eyes widened. She handed the baby to her lady in waiting, the beauty who had captured the king's attention.

"What have you brought me?" the king's wife asked softly.

"Your mother gave me a gift." The king lifted the horn. "Three wishes will be mine, in exchange for one wish of hers. Her wish is that I set you free."

The king's wife took the shawl from his hands and wrapped it around her shoulders. Without a word, she left the room, running through the corridor, down the stairs, and out to the glacier. She was never seen again.

Takla smiled at the lady in waiting, then kissed his son on the forehead. Since the lady held his son cradled in her arms, bestowing this sign of fatherly affection afforded the king an opportunity to admire her bosom.

Filled with joy and thoughts of continuing power, Takla took the hunting horn and left the castle, climbing to a rock outcropping that overlooked the glacier, the castle, the pass, and the valley.

The Sun was dipping toward the horizon in the west. Takla looked out over his kingdom and thought of his first wish.

He put the horn to his lips and blew. A blue light flickered in the glacier below, then the ice woman stood before him. "What is your wish?" she asked.

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"I wish that I may remain above all others as I am now and that my reign will last as long as the stones of the mountain."

The ice woman smiled and lifted her hand. The silver horn fell from the king's hand as a transformation took place. The king became stone, a royal statue gazing over the kingdom.

"As you wish, you will stay here, above all others," the ice woman said. "Your reign will last as long as the stones of the mountain. Until the wind and the weather wear you away, you will reign over this place."

Among the mountain people, there is a saying. "Like a gift of the ice women," they say about presents that end up costing the recipient dearly. It is best not to meddle in magical matters. One must not trust a gift of the ice women.

I had just reached the end of the story when the wind blew the tavern door open. At the time, I thought that was a stroke of good luck; the blast of cold air made my listeners shiver and appreciate the story all the more. "A gift of the ice women," I said, and the crowd laughed.

I passed among the shepherds, gathering coins from those who had enjoyed the tale. When I walked near the kitchen door, I saw that Sarasri was frowning. She spoke to me as I passed. "That's not a good tale to tell so close to the glacier. You'd best keep your shutters closed tonight. The ice women won't like it that you're talking about them."

I was a humble storyteller, far beneath the notice of magical creatures. I didn't think that the ice women would concern themselves with my doings. Still, I followed Sarasri's advice that night. I closed the shutters — not to keep out the ice women, but rather to keep out the cold. Unfortunately the wooden shutters were warped. Though I closed them as tightly as I could, a cold draft blew through the gap between them.

I did not sleep well. I could hear the glacier groaning and creaking as the ice shifted and moved. I was glad when the first light of dawn crept through the gap in the shutters, casting a bright line on my mother, who slept soundly beside me.

Quietly, I dressed and went down to the street. The weather had grown colder and the rocky paths were slick with frost. At a baker's shop I bought sweet buns for our breakfast. The buns were warm against my hands as I carried them back to our room.

When I entered the room, I called to my mother to wake her, but she

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did not move. I shook her, and still she did not wake. "Mother," I called to her. "Mother?"

She would not wake up. I found Sarasri in the kitchen and she sent a boy to find a healer. I sat by my mother's side, breakfast forgotten.

The healer, an old woman with white hair, sat on the edge of my mother's bed and felt my mother's cheek. She held a silver spoon beneath my mother's nose and watched to see that my mother's breath fogged the silver. She stroked my mother's hand and called to her. Then she shook her head and said, "Ice sickness."

I stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"It comes from the wind off the glacier," Sarasri said. She frowned unhappily. "That's what comes of telling tales about the women of the ice."

"Those who get the ice sickness sleep peacefully until they waste away," the healer said.

I stared at my mother. Her face was so calm and peaceful in sleep. It was hard to believe that anything was amiss. "What can I do?"

"There is one cure," the healer said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Three drops of dragon's blood. Place them in her mouth and they'll warm her back to life." The healer shrugged. "But we have no dragon's blood and no hero to fetch it for us."

Sarasri shook her head sorrowfully. "As if a hero would help," she said. "How many have journeyed to Dragon's Gate, filled with pride and noble plans? Not a one has returned."

"Do you have to be a hero to fetch dragon's blood?" I asked. "We only need three drops of blood. The dragon doesn't have to die to give up three drops."

Sarasri frowned but the old healer nodded. "That's true," she said. "Slaying the dragon is not necessary, if you can get a bit of blood by some other means." She studied me. Her eyes were a brilliant blue, unfaded by her years. "Do you know anything about dragons?" she asked me.

"Only what I have learned from heroic tales," I said. "And that's not much. The dragon usually dies as soon as the prince shows up."

The old woman nodded. "Those tales are about princes, not about dragons. Those stories describe a dragon as a fire-breathing lizard with wings."

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"Is that wrong?" I asked.

"It is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. The essence of a dragon is not in its appearance, but in its nature."

"What is its nature?"

"A dragon is an inferno of anger, blazing with fury, exploding with pain. A dragon is a beast of fire and passion, feeding on fear and hatred." The old woman stood and drew her woolen cloak around her shoulders. "Approached with fear, a dragon responds with fire."

"What if one does not approach with fear?" I asked.

She shrugged. "A difficult task to accomplish," she said. "But if it could be done, you might manage to start a conversation. I have heard that dragons like to talk. But they can smell a liar and that awakens their anger. Never lie to a dragon."

PERHAPS THIS IS WHERE the story really begins. With my realization that I had to go to Dragon's Gate and return with three drops of blood from the dragon who had guarded the pass for the past hundred years.

I arranged for Sarasri to care for my mother. I left the pony in Sarasri's stables, since the way ahead was too rough and steep for the animal. Then I followed a footpath that led high into the hills.

Dragon's Gate was once known as Takla's Pass, named after King Takla, who married the ice woman. This mountain pass offered the shortest route from the lowlands to the trading cities on the Northern Sea. Long ago, caravans laden with carpets and spices and gems made their way through the mountains along this road. King Takla — and after him Takla's son, King Rinzen — charged merchants for safe passage.

All that changed a hundred years ago when good King Belen of the lowlands had, at the urging of rich merchants, sought to overthrow King Rinzen and put an end to his tolls. King Belen's army invaded the mountain kingdom. But a dragon released by some black magic drove back his army and closed the pass.

The dragon laid waste to the land. What had once been a thriving kingdom became a barren deserted land. Merchants from the lowlands banded together to offer a reward to any who could slay the dragon and

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open the road through the pass. But all the heroes who tried to win the reward perished in the attempt: burned by the dragon's fire, slashed by the dragon's claws.

Now merchants sent their goods through the desert and around the mountains to the south, a long and perilous journey. In the desert, bandits preyed on caravans and kidnapped merchants for ransom. But the possibility of being waylaid by bandits was better than the certainty of being killed by the dragon.

The path I took to Dragon's Gate was little better than a goat path. Winter avalanches had covered sections of the old trade route. Prickly shrubs had grown over the old road, and no one had cleared them away.

From Nabakhri, it was three days' hard travel to Dragon's Gate. The villages grew smaller and meaner as I traveled. People along the way asked me where I was going — and shook their heads grimly when they heard of my mission. "Turn back, young man," they said. "You haven't a chance of succeeding."

The last village before the dragon's pass was little better than a collection of grimy huts clinging to the side of the mountain. There a tiny teahouse doubled as an inn. Three shepherds sat by the fire in the common room, dining on lentil stew, fried bread, and tea.

The innkeeper was a stout man with an impressive mustache and a head of hair as thick as the wool on the mountain sheep. "Are you lost?" he asked me. "There is nowhere to go on this trail."

I explained my mission. He served me dinner and sat with me while I ate.

"You say you must approach the dragon without fear," he said. "How can you do that? Only a fool would not fear the dragon."

It was a good question. As I climbed the mountain trails, I had been thinking about how to quell my fear.

"Some of the stories that I tell are very frightening," I told the innkeeper. "But I am not afraid when I tell these tales because I know they will end well. What I am doing now is worthy of a story. If I think of this as a story I am telling, I will not be afraid."

The innkeeper frowned. "But you don't know that there will be a happy ending to this story of yours."

"Of course there will be," I said. "I am telling the story, remember? Why would I tell my own story with an unhappy ending?"

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The innkeeper shook his head. "It sounds like you are just fooling yourself."

I nodded. "Indeed I am. What better way to keep away fear?"

The innkeeper shook his head and poured me another cup of tea. He spent the rest of the evening telling me of heroes who went to slay the dragon and never returned.

When I left the village the next morning, I did my best to put this conversation out of my mind. It wasn't easy. Above me loomed the barren crags of Dragon's Gate. Black rocks, like pointed teeth, made sharp silhouettes against the blue sky. One outcropping bore a resemblance to a standing man. That, it was said, was all that remained of King Takla.

Late in the afternoon, I reached the ice field that surrounded the castle where the dragon lived. Over the years, the glacier had flattened the walls that surrounded the castle gardens and had engulfed the outbuildings. The castle's outer walls had collapsed under the pressure of the ice, but the castle keep, the structure's central fortress, still stood. One tall tower rose from the ice field. From where I stood, the tower was as big as my thumb, held at arm's length.

Cautiously I started across the ice fields toward the tower. I used my walking stick to test each patch of ice before trusting my weight to it. Once, the ice collapsed beneath my stick, sending up a spray of snow as it fell. At my feet, where my next step would have taken me, was a crevasse so deep that the bottom was lost in blue light and shadows. The crash of the ice shelf hitting the bottom of the crevasse reverberated through the glacier.

The wind cut through my cloak; I could not stop shivering. At first, my feet ached with the cold. After a time, they became numb. I thought about how it would feel to lie down on the ice, like the ice woman in the story of King Takla. It would be painful at first, but then I would grow numb. I could rest, sleeping as peacefully as my mother slept.

The sky darkened to a deep blue. The light that reflected from cracks deep in the ice was the same beautiful blue. In my weariness, I grew dizzy. Looking up at the sky seemed much the same as gazing down into the ice. My walking stick slipped and I stumbled, falling full length onto the ice. I turned over on my back to look up at the blue sky, grateful to be resting.

I thought about staying there, just for a while. But that would not do.

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No tavern crowd would pay good money to hear about a hero who gave up and lay down in the snow. So I got up and kept walking on feet that felt like wood.

At last, I reached the tower and circled it, looking for a way in. Halfway around, I discovered a gap in the tower wall. I ducked through the gap and found myself on an ice-slicked stairway. Narrow slits in the walls let in just enough light to reveal the stone steps. Beneath the layers of ice, I could see sconces that had once held torches. The walls were marked with soot where flames had licked the stone.

Though the castle walls blocked the wind, it was even colder in the castle than it had been outside. My teeth chattered; I could not stop shivering. I climbed the stairs slowly, taking care not to slip on the icy steps.

At the top of the stairs was a wide corridor. The walls were clear of ice and the air felt a little warmer. Looking down the corridor, I could see a glimmer of golden light, spilling from an open doorway. I walked toward it.

In the doorway, I stopped and stared, my heart pounding. I could feel fear scratching at the edges of my awareness, but I reminded myself that there would be a happy ending. There had to be a happy ending.

The dragon slept in the center of the great hall. The beast lay on what had once been a fine carpet — now tattered and scorched. The air stank of ashes and smoke. I could feel heat radiating from the beast, like the warmth from a banked fire.

To hold fear at bay, I stared at the dragon and imagined how I might describe the monster when I told this story. The dragon's body was like that of a terrible lizard, a lizard as large as a warhorse. Its wings — great leathery wings — stretched over its back. Its eyes were closed. Its mighty head rested on its front talons. I did not stare for too long at the dragon's jaws and powerful talons. Instead, I considered the rest of the room and decided how best to describe it when I was telling this story in a tavern.

This had once been a magnificent hall. The walls were dark with soot, but I could see paintings beneath the layer of grime. More than a hundred years ago, artists had decorated these walls. On the wall to my left, two men in hunting garb shot arrows at mountain goats, which were bounding away up the mountain. On the far side of the room, the wall was painted

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with mountain landscape — the same mountain that lay outside the castle. But the artist had worked in a warmer and happier time. In the painting, wildflowers grew among the gray stones.

In the painting, the stones of the mountain formed a natural cave at the level of the floor. The rocks of the painted cave blended with the very real rocks of a great fireplace, large enough to hold a roasting ox.

Beside that fireplace, a skeleton sat slumped in a carved oak chair. A golden crown rested on the skull. Tatters of rich fabric clung to the bones. They fluttered in the breeze that blew through a large break in the wall to my right.

That wall had been shattered and its painting with it. I tried to imagine the blow that had shattered the wall, sending the stones tumbling inward and leaving a hole big enough to let the dragon pass through. Through the gap, I could see the glacier far below. The first stars of evening were appearing in the darkening sky. I shivered in the cool breeze.

"I smell an enemy," a voice growled.

I looked at the dragon. The beast had not moved, but its eyes were open now. They glowed like the embers of a fire. Colors shifted and flickered in their depths: gold and red and blue. "I know you are an enemy because you stink of the lowlands. You aren't a prince. You aren't a hero. What are you, and why have you come here?"

Be honest, I thought. Dragons can spot a liar. "A humble storyteller," I said.

"A storyteller?" The dragon lifted its head and studied me with glowing eyes. "How unusual. For the past hundred years, all my visitors have come to kill me. They march up the road from the lowlands with their soldiers following behind and their fear wakes me. I feel the shivering in their souls, the hatred in their hearts. I feel it burning and my own fire flares in response. And I shake off sleep and rise to do battle."

The dragon yawned, revealing a terrifying array of teeth. The beast stretched slowly, shaking out its great golden wings with a leathery rustle. Then the monster regarded me once again. "But you're not a hero. You are dressed as a boy, but I know by your smell that you are a girl. You are afraid, but not so very afraid. And you want something from me. What is it you want? Tell me, girl of the lowlands, why I shouldn't roast your bones with a single breath?"

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As a storyteller, I have learned that everyone has a story. Not only that, but everyone has a story that they think should be told.

"I have a few reasons for coming here," I said carefully. "As a storyteller, I know many tales in which there are dragons. But those are stories about princes. And in every one of them, the dragon dies at the end of the tale. That doesn't seem right. I thought you might help me to tell a new sort of tale about dragons."

"Very tricky," said the dragon. "You hope to appeal to my vanity. And I notice that you said you had a few reasons and then you told me only one. You hope to intrigue me so that I'll decide you are interesting enough to spare."

When an audience catches you out, I have found it is best to acknowledge that they are right. If you deny it, they'll turn against you. "Have I succeeded?" I asked.

"Perhaps." The dragon continued to study me. "As long as I find you interesting, I will let you live. If I grow bored, I will roast you before I return to sleep. For now, I will spare you because you remind me of a wild girl I once knew." The dragon blinked slowly. "Would you like to hear about that wild girl? She was a lovely princess, until I destroyed her."

Not an entirely promising start. I reminded the dragon of a princess that it had destroyed. But at least the beast was not going to roast me immediately.

Though the heat radiated by the dragon had warmed me, my legs were trembling with weariness. I took a chance and asked, "Might I come in and sit while you tell the tale?"

The dragon stared at me, and for a moment I thought all was lost. Then the monster opened its jaws in a terrible grin. "Of course. I have forgotten the duties of a host. Come in. Sit down. There." The dragon lifted a talon and gestured to a bench beside the chair where the skeleton sat.

I crossed the room and sat on the bench, putting my pack on the stone floor beside me.

"You look cold," the dragon said. "Let me kindle a fire."

The beast opened its mouth and a blast of fire shot into the fireplace beside me. The half-burned logs, remnants of a long-dead fire, blazed.

"Alas, I have no food and drink to offer you," the dragon said. "The kitchens were crushed by the glacier long ago."

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I opened my pack and took out a metal flask filled with brandy. "I have a bit of brandy. It's not the best, but I would be happy to share."

The dragon's toothy grin widened. "You drink and I will talk. I will tell the storyteller a story."

I sipped from the flask and felt the warmth of the brandy fill my throat and my chest.

"The wild girl was a princess," the dragon said. "A wild mountain princess more likely to be found hunting bandits than working her embroidery." The beast cocked its head, regarding me thoughtfully. "Tell me, what do you know of this castle, this kingdom?"

I chose my words carefully. "I know of King Takla, who built this castle and captured an ice woman for his queen."

"Very good," the dragon said. "Then you recognize that horn?"

I followed the dragon's gaze and saw a silver hunting horn, lying on the stone floor beside the royal skeleton. "King Takla's horn?" I asked.

"The very same. Blow it and the ice woman will grant your wish. But you must be very careful what you wish for."

I stared at the instrument in amazement. Though I had often told the story of King Takla, I had never thought about what happened to the horn.

"The wild princess of my story was the granddaughter of King Takla. Her father, King Rinzen, was the ruler of this mountain kingdom. He was a good king, noble and wise. Do you know of him?"

"I have heard of him," I admitted. The stories that I knew all emphasized the wealth of King Rinzen and how unfair his tolls had been.

"What have you heard?"

"Far less than I wish to know. Far less than you could tell me."

"An evasive answer," the dragon said, studying me with those great glowing eyes. "You know, I have heard that storytellers are all liars."

"Not necessarily liars," I said. "But careful in choosing the right audience for a tale."

"And I am not the right audience for the lowland tales of King Rinzen," the dragon said.

I nodded.

"Very well. Then I will tell you a tale that you don't hear in the lowlands."

I tipped back my flask and took a swallow of brandy, grateful to have survived this long.

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"The men and women of King Rinzen's court hunted in the hills — sometimes for wild goat for the king's table, and sometimes for the bandits who sought to prey on merchant caravans. Decades before, King Takla had driven away the worst of the bandit gangs. But keeping the pass free of robbers and rogues required constant vigilance. You know of all this, of course."

I shook my head. None of the stories told in the lowlands talked about the bandits that King Takla and King Rinzen had driven off. In the lowland tales, these two kings were accounted as no better than bandits themselves.

"I could tell you many fine stories about bandits, about their hidden treasures, their secret caves. But that will have to wait. Just now, I was telling you about King Rinzen's court. The king was fond of musicians and storytellers. Many came to the castle to perform for the court. In this very hall, minstrels played and bards told tales of adventure, while the king listened and rewarded them handsomely for their art."

The dragon paused and I thought the beast might have lost the thread of the story. "What about the princess?" I asked.

The dragon turned its gaze back to me, eyes narrowing. "I suggest that you let me tell this story in my own way," the beast growled.

"Of course," I said hastily. "As you wish. I just wondered about the princess."

"Yes, Princess Tara. One summer evening, Princess Tara came home late from an afternoon of hawking. She knew that a troupe of performers from the lowlands had come to entertain the king. They had come from the court of King Belen, sent by him to King Rinzen. That evening, there was to be a gala performance, but Tara was weary from the hunt. She sent her apologies to her father the king and she did not go to the court that evening. She dined on bread and cheese in her chambers, and went to her bed early.

"That night she woke to the screams of women and the clash of steel." The dragon's eyes were wide open now, glowing more brightly than before. "She pulled on her clothes and ran into the corridor. It was dark except for the glow of smoldering straw. A torch had fallen, igniting the straw that was strewn on the stone floor."

"What did she do?" I asked.

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"She listened in the darkness. Someone was running toward her, scattering the burning straw beneath his feet. In the dim light, she recognized a young bard who had come to the castle a week before. His eyes were wild; he was bleeding from a cut over his eye.

"'What is happening?' Tara called to him."

"'Treachery,' he gasped. 'Belen's men are in the castle. There is fighting in the great hall.' Then he ran on, and he was gone.

"Tara rushed through the darkness, hurrying toward the great hall. There, the torches cast a crimson light over a terrible scene. The air was thick with the stench of newly spilled blood. Her father was slumped in the big oak chair by the fire. He had been stabbed in the back. By the door were more dead men — some were castle guards, some were men clad in minstrel garb. The festive cloak of one of the minstrels had been torn by a sword stroke, and Tara could see armor beneath the velvet."

The dragon fell silent. I stared at the skeleton in the chair by the fireplace. King Rinzen, still wearing his crown in death.

"What had happened?" I asked at last.

"Belen's troupe of performers was a troop of assassins. They had killed the king, fought the guard, and opened the gates to the soldiers outside.

"Tara ran to her father's side. She kissed his cold cheek and vowed that she would take revenge for what had happened that night. On the wall above the fireplace hung King Takla's great silver hunting horn, the gift of the ice woman. It had fallen from King Takla's hand when he turned to stone. No one had been bold enough to risk blowing it again. An object of beauty, power, and danger, it hung on the wall above the fireplace.

"Tara could hear the tramping of boots and the rattle of armor in the corridor. Her father was dead and Belen's men had taken the castle. Tara pushed a bench to a spot near the fire and stood on the bench to take down the horn."

I nodded, realizing with a shiver that I was sitting on that very bench.

The dragon continued, its voice low. "Tara put the horn to her lips and blew, sounding a high clear note that echoed from the stone walls. The wall of the tower cracked and crumbled. A wind from the ice fields blew through the breach in the wall. Through the opening, Tara could see the dark sky above and the pale ice below. A blue light rose from the glacier

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and flew to the tower. A tall woman with flowing white hair appeared before Tara. 'Why have you awakened me?' the woman asked."

"The ice woman," I said.

"Tara's great-grandmother, the mother of the maiden that Takla had stolen," the dragon said. "Tara met the woman's icy gaze. 'I need your aid,' the princess said. 'Belen's men have killed my father.'

"'What do you want of me?' the ice woman said.

"'I want the power to kill my enemies and drive them from our land. I want the strength to avenge my father.'

"'Power and strength and passion,' the woman murmured. 'Death and vengeance. These are dangerous things and you are so young.'

"'Tara fell to her knees before the woman. 'You must help me.'

"The woman touched Tara's cheek. Tara could feel her tears freezing at the ice woman's touch.

"'I will grant your wish,' the ice woman said. 'Your heart will become ice; your passion, fire. And then you will have the power you need. But it troubles me to cast this spell on one so young. So I will also tell you how to break the spell and return to yourself. When the tears of your enemy melt the ice of your heart, you will become yourself once again. Until then, you will have your wish.'

"The woman's cold touch moved to Tara's breast, a searing chill that took her breath away. The woman stepped back. 'Now you will take the shape you need. You are filled with fire and passion, anger and pain. Let those dictate your form. You will have the power you seek and I will return to sleep.'

"The sorrow that had filled Tara at her father's death left her when her heart froze at the woman's touch. Rage and the desire for vengeance filled her.

"Transformation came with burning pain — a searing at her shoulders as wings formed; a blazing spasm as her back stretched, the bones creaking as they changed shape. Her jaws lengthened; her teeth grew sharp. Hands became claws." The dragon stretched its wings. Its claws flexed, making new tears in the carpet on which it lay. "Tara became a dragon," the beast said.

I stared at the dragon.

"Her breath was flame," Tara said. "Her scales shone like the coals of

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a fire, shifting and changing with each passing breeze. Now deep red, brighter than fresh blood; now flickering gold; now shining blue-white, like the heart of a flame." As the dragon spoke, her scales flickered and glowed.

"She spread her wings and flew, swooping low over the soldiers in the road. She opened her terrible jaws and her rage became a blast of fire. The men broke and ran. The horses, mad with fear, trampled the men as they fled. The soldiers died — so many died. In her rage, she did not distinguish between one fleeing figure and another. Belen's men burned in her flames, but so did people of her own castle. Stableboys and chambermaids, peasants and noblemen, fleeing Belen's men, fleeing the monster in the sky."

The dragon fell silent for a moment, then continued softly. "Now I live here in the castle. For a hundred years, I have lived here. Sometimes, heroes come to slay me — and I kill them instead." The dragon studied me with glowing eyes. I stared back, imagining what it would be like to be imprisoned in the body of a monster.

"Sometimes, my rage dies down, like a fire that is banked. But then someone filled with hate and fear stirs those ashes and the fire returns, as hot as ever.

"Now it is your turn, humble storyteller. Tell me a story and I will decide what to do with you."

I met the dragon's steady gaze. "I will tell you why I am here," I said. "This is not a story I would ordinarily tell, since most audiences favor stories about princes and dragons over stories about storytellers. But I think you will find it interesting. This story begins in a mountain town, one week ago. The town was having its harvest festival, and I traveled there with my mother."

I told her the story that you have already heard — about the inn on the edge of the glacier, about my mother's illness, about the healer who explained that three drops of dragon's blood would cure my mother of the illness inflicted by the ice woman. "Hope is what brings me here," I said. "Hope is what keeps me from fear and hatred."

The dragon's glowing eyes did not waver. "So you hope to slay me and take my blood?" the dragon rumbled.

"Slay you?" I laughed. The dragon stared at me, but it had been a long

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night. I had finished the flask of brandy and the dragon hadn't killed me yet. The idea that I planned to slay the dragon was so ridiculous that I couldn't help laughing. I pulled my dagger from my belt. The blade was half as long as one of the dragon's talons. "I suppose I planned to chop off your head with this?" I shook my head. "I'm no dragon slayer."

I thought of my mother's warm smile, of her honest heart. If only she could be here instead of me. She would smile and the dragon would know that this was a woman worth helping. "I had hoped that you might help my mother. That was all I hoped."

"Hope," the dragon repeated, her voice softening. "I remember feeling hope when I was human." The dragon's gaze moved from my face to the gap in the wall. "As a lowlander, you are my enemy. But it has been interesting talking with you this long night. It has reminded me of much that I had forgotten, over the passing years."

I glanced through the breach in the wall. A thin crescent Moon had risen over the glacier. The crackling fire in the fireplace beside me had burned to embers. While drinking brandy and talking with the dragon, I had lost track of time. It was nearly dawn.

"You came to me for help," she said. "What more will you do to save your mother? What will you give me in return for three drops of precious blood?"

I spread my hands. "What would you have me do?"

The dragon did not blink. "In memory of the wild girl that I once was, I will give you three drops of blood. But you must return after you take my blood to your mother. You must come back and keep me company for a time. Will you do that?"

"Yes," I said, without hesitation. "It's a bargain. As soon as my mother is well, I will return."

"Very well then," the dragon said, holding out a taloned paw.

I took a small metal vial from my pack. I reached out and took the dragon's talon in my hand. The scales burned against my skin. With my dagger, I pierced the scaly hide and let three drops of blood fall into the vial. They sizzled as they struck the metal.

"You have a long journey ahead of you," the dragon said. "You'd do well to rest before you begin."

As if I could sleep with a dragon at my side. Still, it did not seem wise

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to argue. I lay down on the carpet between the dragon and the embers of the fire. I pillowed my head on my pack, and closed my eyes. Weary from my long journey, drunk with brandy and success, I slept for a time.

When I woke, the Sun had risen over the glacier. The dragon was sleeping. As quietly as I could, I left the great hall and headed down the mountain.

I will spare you the account of my journey back to my mother's side. Suffice it to say that everyone along the trail was startled to see me, amazed to hear that I had succeeded in my quest.

At last, I reached the inn where my mother slept. Sarasri was astonished to see me. Though she had never believed that I would return, the good woman had been true to her promise. She had taken care of my mother. Pale and thin, my mother slept peacefully in the room where she had been stricken with the ice sickness.

Sarasri summoned the healer, and the old woman came to my mother's chambers. The healer smiled when she saw me.

"Three drops of dragon's blood," I said, holding out the vial.

"Very good," she said.

"Did you slay the dragon?" Sarasri asked, her eyes wide.

I shook my head. "The dragon told me a story and I told the dragon a story. The dragon gave me this blood on the condition that I return to Dragon's Gate when my mother is well."

The healer nodded. "Ah," she said, "you may very well have slain the dragon then."

I stared at the old woman. "I did not. She gave me this blood freely."

"Indeed — she gave it to you as an act of friendship. And that itself may slay the dragon. Dragons feed on hatred and fear. Acting out of love will weaken the beast."

"This act of kindness weakened the dragon?" I said. "That's not fair."

"Hate and fear nourish and strengthen a dragon. Love and friendship erode that strength. Fair or not, it's the way things work." She shrugged. "The next hero may find an easy kill. I have heard that Prince Dexter of Erland will soon be going to Dragon's Gate. But that is no concern of yours."

The old woman took the vial of blood. Her touch was cold on my hand. Gently, she stroked my mother's hair, then wet my mother's lips with the dragon's blood.

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As I watched, the color returned to my mother's cheeks. My mother parted her lips, sighed, then opened her eyes and blinked at me. "Al," she murmured. "It must be past breakfast time. I'm ravenous."

Sarasri clapped her hands together and hurried off to fetch food. I held my mother's hands, cold in my grip at first, then warming — and I told her all that had happened. She feasted on scones and fresh milk. And when I thought to look around for the healer, the old woman was gone.

My mother recovered quickly. By the evening, she was out of bed. By the next morning, she was asking what we would do next.

I knew that I had to return to the dragon's castle as soon as possible. The healer's words had left me uneasy. My mother was captivated by the dragon's story, and she said that she would go with me. With some effort, I persuaded her that it was more important that she write a ballad that told Tara's tale.

At last I prevailed. But not before I found out more information about Prince Dexter and his plans.

Erland was a kingdom to the north — a small, cold, barren place. Its population lived by fishing and hunting the great whales that lived in the Northern Seas. Princes were as common as fish heads in Erland. (The king of Erland was a virile man.) Prince Dexter, the youngest of the king's eight sons, had left Erland to seek his fortune.

A group of merchants in the lowlands had offered Dexter a great reward if he would slay the dragon. From the merchants' point of view, it was a very sensible move. If the prince failed, it cost them nothing. If he succeeded, the dragon's death opened an easy route to the trading ports — and Dexter's reward would be nothing compared to the fortunes they would make.

From the prince's point of view — well, I confess, I do not understand the prince's point of view. It seems to me that there are easier ways to make your fortune than attempting to slay a dragon that has killed many heroes. But princes are raised on stories in which the dragon always dies. Like me, the prince believed in a happy ending.

Knowing that the prince would soon be going to Dragon's Gate, I set out on the trail. It was a long, difficult journey — though not as difficult as it had been the first time. It was not as cold as it had been before. As I climbed the pass to reach the castle, I saw a few wildflowers blooming

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among the gray stones of the mountain. They seemed like a good sign, until I looked down from my high vantagepoint and saw soldiers riding up the trail below me. Their banner was green and white, the colors of Erland.

I climbed the ice-slicked stairs of the castle and made my way to the great hall. The dragon lay where I had seen her last, stretched out on the tattered rug. But her scales were dull and lusterless.

"Tara!" I said. "Wake up!"

The dragon did not move. I threw myself on her great scaly neck. "Wake up!" I shouted again. "There is danger here."

I could feel the barest warmth through the scaly hide. The dragon's breathing was low and shallow.

I could hear the tramping of boots and the rattle of armor in the corridor. Prince Erland and his men had caught up with me. "Can you hear them?" I said. "Can you feel their fear? Can you feel the hatred in their hearts? They have come to kill you. You must wake up."

The dragon did not move.

The prince stepped into the room. His sword was drawn. For a moment I could not help but see the scene as I might have described it in a tale for the tavern crowd. A handsome prince lifted his sword against a terrible monster. But I could see the scene in another way as well: a beast of unearthly beauty, an enchanted princess enslaved and transformed by her own passion, dying for a kindness that had sapped her strength.

I pulled my dagger and stood between the prince and the dragon. The prince looked startled to see me. I could tell by his expression that this was not the way he expected the story to go. I have never heard a story in which anyone tries to protect a dragon.

"You must not kill this dragon," I told him. "She is an enchanted princess. She was weakened because she acted with great kindness. You must not slay her."

"Enchanted princess?" The prince frowned, staring at the sleeping dragon. "I'm not likely to kiss that. A woman capable of laying waste to a kingdom and driving soldiers before her like sheep is no wife for me."

Clearly he had heard too many stories of princes and enchanted princesses. I had suggested neither a kiss nor a royal wedding.

"I think I'd better just kill the beast," the prince was saying. "If you do not step aside, I will have to remove you."

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I've told enough stories about princes to know that is what they are trained to do — slay monsters and marry princesses. This prince, like others of his kind, was not a man inclined to change direction quickly.

"I will not step aside," I said, holding out my dagger.

The prince was, however, trained to fight. I was not. With a flick of his sword, the prince struck my dagger aside, stepped in, twisted it from my hands, and tossed it into the corner. Then he lifted his sword.

I fell on the dragon's neck so that the prince could not strike the sleeping dragon without striking me. "Wake up," I murmured to Tara, my eyes filling with tears. It was too much; it was not fair. "You must save yourself." My tears spilled over, dropping onto the beast's neck, trickling over the dull scales.

Where the tears touched, the scales shone with a new brilliance, a blue-white light so bright it dazzled my eyes. The dragon shuddered beneath me. I released my hold on her neck, scrambling away.

The brilliant light — ten times brighter than sunlight on the ice fields — enveloped the dragon. I squinted through my tears at the light. I could see a shadow in the glare, a dark shape that changed as I strained to see what it was.

The light faded, and I blinked, my eyes still dazzled. A woman stood on the tattered rug. Her eyes were as blue as glacial ice. Her hair was the color of flames. She was dressed in an old-fashioned hunting tunic and breeches. Her hand was on the sword at her belt, and I was certain that she knew how to use it. Much experience with bandits, I suspected.

TARA SAT BY THE FIRE that the soldiers had built, watching the flames.

"Of course, you can claim your reward," I told the prince. "The merchants asked that you do away with the dragon — and you achieved that end. Your men can testify to it: The dragon is gone."

"That's true," the prince agreed.

"It is the way the story had to go," I explained to the prince. "My tears melted the ice in her heart and she returned to her true form."

"And now what happens?" The prince was studying Tara thoughtfully.

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Tara turned from contemplating the fire and met his gaze. "Now I return my kingdom to its former glory. With the dragon gone, my people will return." She smiled. "It will take time, but there's no rush."

"You will need help," the prince said. "Such a lovely princess should not rule alone. Perhaps...."

"Perhaps you should remember your own thoughts, as you prepared to slay a dragon," Princess Tara said, still smiling. "A woman capable of laying waste to a kingdom and driving soldiers before her like sheep is no wife for you."

She turned her gaze back to the fire. "My people will return, and so will the bandits. We will hunt the bandits in the hills and the merchants will pay a toll to pass this way."

"Perhaps you'd best not tell the merchants that part just yet," I advised the prince.

Is the story done yet? Not quite. There is still King Takla's horn to account for. That evening, I stood by the glacier and I blew that horn. I saw a flash of blue light over the ice, and then a beautiful woman wrapped in a white shawl stood before me. Her eyes looked familiar — a beautiful, piercing blue. Her hair was white, and she smiled with recognition when she saw me.

"You have called me," the ice woman said. "What do you wish?"

I held out the horn. "Only to return this horn," I said. "Nothing more."

The ice woman studied me. "No other wishes? You do not wish for wealth or fame or glory?"

I smiled and shook my head.

"You dress as a man, yet you are a woman. Would you wish to be a man?"

I thought about Princess Tara, a woman who hunted for bandits and claimed her own kingdom, and shook my head. "I have no wish to make," I said. Then I asked, "How is your daughter?"

"Very well," she said. "She was pleased to return to her home."

I nodded. "Of course she would be."

"How is your mother?" the ice woman asked.

"Doing well. Writing a ballad about Tara."

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She took the horn from my extended hand. "You did very well," she said then. "I am glad that you could help my great-granddaughter, Tara."

I bowed to her. "I am grateful to have been of service." When I looked up, she was gone.

I returned to Sarasri's inn in Nabakhri, where my mother waited. I reached the inn early in the afternoon. I went looking for my mother and found her in the kitchen. Sarasri was kneading bread and my mother was playing the harp and keeping her company.

The kitchen was warm. A pot of lamb stew bubbled on the fire. The yeasty scent of bread filled the air. "Al is back!" Sarasri shouted when she saw me. My mother abandoned her music and hugged me. Sarasri heaped lamb stew in a bowl and insisted that I eat it all.

"My wonderful child," my mother said. "You must tell us all that has happened since you left here."

I shook my head, my mouth filled with stew. "Tonight," I said. "I will tell the tale tonight."

The tavern was full that night. People had heard of my mother's illness, of my trip to Dragon's Gate and my return with dragon's blood, of my return to Dragon's Gate to keep my promise.

I smiled at the crowd. Dressed in tunic and breeches, returning in triumph from Dragon's Gate, I knew the story that they expected. It was the story of Al, a heroic young man who confronts a monster.

"My name is Alita," I said. "And that means 'a girl to be trusted.' Some of you know me as Al and think that I am a young man. But the world is filled with illusions — as I learned when I met the dragon. Let me tell you my story."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Song of Arthur, by John Matthews, Quest Books, 2002, $19.95.

JOHN Matthews's latest could be considered a companion volume to his earlier book, *The Song of Taliesin* (2001). Like that book, *The Song of Arthur* is narrated by a monk, albeit a different one from the Taliesin book, with some seven centuries separating the two. Where "the little monk" of the first book lived in the time of the stories he told, Brother Joscelyn "discovers" the manuscripts of the stories and verses to be found here and is supposed to have collected them together for this volume.

The use of the monks as narrators doesn't distract from the stories. Rather, they allow Matthews to provide explanation to some of the obscure references without interrupting the flow of the stories. And the little snippets of their own history that Matthews shares are interesting enough to add more than simply some color.

The stories themselves will surprise readers with only a cursory knowledge of Arthur and his knights. They are based on much earlier versions that eventually grew to become what we know as the Arthurian Matter. Most of them come from Welsh sources, some only existing in fragments.

What Matthews has done, as he did so well in the Taliesin book, is recast the stories so that we feel we are privy to the storytelling of some ancient bard, except in a language that is more contemporary. But while the language is modern, Matthews retains the poetry of these stories, and more importantly, the Celtic mysteries underlying them.

Beyond the entertainment value of the stories themselves, Matthews provides an extensive section of notes at the end of the book, citing the sources for the material, and steering the reader to

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later, literary retellings. Interior illustrations are once again brought beautifully to the page by Stuart Littlejohn (which strikes me as a Robin Hoodish sort of name and appropriate to an illustrator of British folklore).

Both these books are highly recommended to anyone with an interest, not only in Arthurian Matter, but in the Western Mystery tradition that lies at the heart of it.

Dark Angel: The Eyes Only Dossier, by D. A. Stern, Del Rey, 2003, $14.95.

I didn't expect to read this book, never mind review it. It's not that I have anything against the now-cancelled television series. It had a lot of great ideas and some real sf speculation, plus I appreciated that the main character made her living as a bicycle messenger, lived in a squat, and cared more for her family of choice than the "big issues" of the day, only getting involved in those big issues when they threatened one of her family members.

But watching the odd episode of the show's one thing. Reading a novelization or (what I thought this was) an episode guide, is something else entirely — aimed more at those who can't get enough of what was on the screen. (And I don't mean that negatively. I've long since realized that people should read what they enjoy, not what I or anyone else thinks they should be reading.)

Still, I did my usual thing, as I do with every book that arrives in my post office box, and cracked it open to the first page and read a bit. And that's when I discovered that *The Eyes Only Dossier* is more akin to the work of Nick Bantock (he of *Griffin & Sabine* fame) in the way the story is told entirely through extraneous material, rather than in traditional prose.

The book consists of four stories, actually — four cases under analysis by Logan Cale, the investigative reporter on the show who goes by the nom de plume of "Eyes Only." While there are comments by Cale throughout, the main body of material is the research he's unearthed about each story: email correspondences, phone and trial transcripts, articles from newspapers and magazines, and such.

The material is presented in such a way that it tells a linear story, but the real fascination comes from poring through the material. Author Stern has done a meticulous job, especially considering that he had to write all this "research" in the first place.

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I should warn you, however, that the book isn't self-contained. Some familiarity with the television show is required because *The Eyes Only Dossier* doesn't give much backstory. It simply plunges right in, expecting you to know the history of the near-future world in which it's set.

The Bookstore Mouse, by Peggy Christian, Harcourt, 2002, $5.95.

This is a story for any lover of books and words — so long as the idea of its being told from the viewpoint of a somewhat anthropomorphized mouse doesn't strike you as too twee.

Cervantes is the mouse who, while trying to escape the bookstore's cat, finds himself reading a book about a scribe. Siegfried (the scribe) decides to save a town from a mysterious danger, and Cervantes ends up falling into the story with him. Now, I realize that this has been done before, but there are some lovely twists and turns in this take, and it's completely charming from start to finish.

For one thing, while Cervantes is really in the book, he's really reading it as well, which will give you delightful passages such as the one where Cervantes and the scribe are nervous about entering a cave where a dragon is:

"So I left Siegfried crouching beneath the entrance of the cave and jumped ahead in the story, trying to find the description of the dragon."

The Bookstore Mouse is full of wordplay and wit, and while there are messages to be found in its pages, Peggy Christian doesn't beat us over the head with them. And she's certainly crafted a story that will please the adult reader. In fact, I wonder at its designation of being for "ages 8 to 12," since there are a lot of Big Words to be found here — or at least I had to go and look up a lot of them myself.

This Harcourt edition is a reprint of the original 1995 one and retains Gary Lippincott's wonderful pen and ink illustrations.

They Have Not Seen the Stars: The Collected Poetry of Ray Bradbury, Stealth Press, 2002, $29.95.

It was with some trepidation that I approached this book. Ray Bradbury is unquestionably one of the big voices in North American Literature, renowned for his short stories and novels. But Bradbury as poet?

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For some reason, I didn't see it. While Bradbury can certainly evoke a wonderfully lyric sense of mystery and wonder in his stories, he does it in prose that is plain-spoken — and I mean that as a compliment. Plain, simple prose is deceptively difficult to get down on paper and Bradbury is a master at it. But that doesn't necessarily translate into good poetry.

So I had the fear that this would prove to be a vanity project, and I won't deny that some of what I found in the collection's pages wasn't to my taste. For the most part, the poems that didn't work for me were the ones with strict meter and rhymes, such as (for all its admirable sentiment) "Satchmo Saved!" or "Touch Your Solitude to Mine." Or some of the sentimental entries, or just plain silly ones like "Groon."

But overall this is a strong collection, full of stories and reminiscences, thoughtful observations and fascinating speculations, told in robust, unpretentious verse that often soars. You have only to dip in and try a few selections — such as the title poem, or "That Son of Richard III" and "Boys Are Always Running Somewhere" — to see what I mean.

If your local bookstore can't get you a copy, it can be ordered directly from *www.stealthpress.com*.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Altered Carbon, by Richard K. Morgan, Del Rey, 2003, $13.95.

Fat White Vampire Blues, by Andrew Fox, Del Rey, 2003, $13.95.

The Etched City, by K. J. Bishop, Prime Books, 2003, $16.95.

AT ITS BEST, science fiction — fantastic fiction as a whole — steps out of the frame to probe at man's place in the universe, to address questions of ontology and identity rarely posed by mundane, mimetic fiction. At *its* best, detective or crime fiction serves to critique the social order, to peel away layers of the seemly and seeming; it's always, at heart, a political fiction.

Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* well deserves the buzz afforded it: marvelous reviews in the U.K., predictions of major awards, film rights optioned by Joel Silver *(The Matrix, Lethal Weapon)*. It really *is* a near-perfect, seamless meld of detective fiction and high-tech science fiction. This first novel worries at who and what we are and why, all the while musing (as David Soyka points out on the SFSite) that commercial and political interests forever pursue markedly different interests from those they call upon to fight in their behalf.

Throw in enough action for five or six novels, an intricate plot that ducks, turns, and twists page by page, a richly imagined if often unfathomable future society, and writing that never falters, by turns appealing to the senses, reflecting confusion, and carrying the narrative forward in powerful strides.

In the 26th century, every human at birth is implanted with a cortical stack that records the whole of that human's consciousness, everything he or she has known, experienced, thought, felt. In the event of death, this stack may be transferred into a new body, a new *sleeve*. Prisons contain no live prisoners,

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only imprints of cortical stacks. Actual travel is no longer necessary; travelers beam their stacks across stellar distances, slipping into new sleeves. Following death, the poor must make do with second-rate, even synthetic bodies. The well-to-do have multiple sleeves stored against use, rendering them to all effects immortal.

Takeshi Kovacs returns painfully to life to find himself on Earth, light-years away from Harlan's World where he'd been relegated to prison stacks, brought back and resleeved by an industrial giant who insists that Kovacs investigate his murder, passed off as suicide.

Former member of the Envoy Corps — "peacekeepers" for the repressive regime — Kovacs, neurochemically enhanced, has been trained to a fine edge.

"There are a lot of us out there, yes," he explains to the policewoman with whom he forms an uneasy alliance. "There's not much else to do once you've been discharged from the corps. They won't let you into anything that might lead to a position of power or influence. Nobody trusts Envoys, and that means no promotion. No prospects. No loans, no credit.

"...And the stuff we've been trained to do is so close to crime, there's almost no difference. Except that crime is easier.... And when you've spent the last decade of your life jacking in and out of sleeves, cooling out on stack, and living virtual, the threats that law enforcement has to offer are pretty bland."

Soon enough Kovacs finds himself set not only against the police but also against his employer, street punks, apparent allies, a social system he doesn't understand, and numerous underworld bosses.

Altered Carbon is, like all three first novels reviewed here, an extraordinary piece of work. Wonderfully written, faultlessly paced, it introduces a major new writer.

Everywhere there are marvelous Besteresque touches. An AI-managed hotel that, when new statutes struck, applied and won independent status, driven now to fill itself with guests and fulfill their every need — including gunning down attackers in the lobby, but only after they've registered.

Or the idea that, with death a mere hiccough, torture might be continued eternally.

Richard Morgan has said of his novel's origins: "I got into this huge and not entirely sober argument with a Buddhist one night about the injustice of a system of reincarnation

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where you end up with a karmic debt (or credit) for a previous life you can't remember and therefore, as far as the current you is concerned, a life you haven't lived. That got me thinking about where the exact parameters of self are, and how technology is inevitably going to reset them."

A second installment of the Takeshi Kovacs saga, *Broken Angels*, by every indication another fine novel, has just appeared in the U.K.

Is there really a ruler (with or without nun attached) to measure literary fiction against genre? I don't think so. A well-written vampire novel may represent alienation far better than any dozen tales of disaffected teenagers hanging about malls or a season's worth of novels from middle-aged white men thinking their sorrows are the world's.

It comes as no surprise that Andrew Fox, author of *Fat White Vampire Blues*, was a student of the late George Alec Effinger. Effinger staked a major claim to New Orleans as a place so fantastic by nature that little exaggeration was required. George was also among the funniest people I've known, his conversation filled with comic trip wires and satiric Brown Betties.

Fat White Vampire Blues is the same.

There's a great tradition of New Orleans vampire novels, of course: Anne Rice, Barbara Hambly, Nancy Collins. Poppy Z. Brite, who, line for line, word for word, remains one of the finest writers working today. In this very, very funny first novel, Andrew Fox bears the standard high.

Like the city, Jules Duchon has been around a long time. But where the city's size is circumscribed geographically, Jules isn't. What he loves most is taking substantial black women out for a typical New Orleans meal — red beans and rice maybe, with smoked sausage, a fried oyster po-boy, side of cornbread — before feasting upon them. The taste is exquisite, bodies easily disposed of. But the cholesterol and saturated fat has made Jules thrice the man he once was, weighing in at 450 pounds.

And now some black vampire dude comes after him. Tells him to stick to feeding off his own kind or else, then turns to a panther and pees all over Jules's coffin.

As much as anything else, New Orleans is about being left alone. So that *or else* (or maybe the pee?) motivates Jules as he's not been motivated for most of his hundred

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years, takes him back into the labyrinth of his past: to the city coroner for whom he worked for years; to his first great love Maureen, the one who turned him and who, Jules-size herself now, still works as a stripper on Bourbon Street; to his old sidekick Doodlebug, late of Tibet and California, a cross-dresser. Here Jules and Doodlebug reprise past roles as superhero crime-fighters.

"Doodlebug's new costume... consisted of a sunburst yellow leotard, metallic purple tights, a matching purple domino mask, and shiny black vinyl go-go boots. The white calf-skin gloves were a nice touch. 'I'm almost embarrassed to admit it,' Jules said, 'but this new outfit of yours looks a helluva lot better than the old one ever did. Thanks for remembering the old color scheme, though.'

"'Sure thing.' Doodlebug smiled. 'You *know* I'd never pass up a perfect opportunity to dress up.'"

Andrew Fox brings the city in all its immense variety, all its tastes, its smells, its customs and self-contradictions, darkly to life. Sharply plotted, witty in language and invention, *Fat White Vampire Blues* moves to a perfect if unsuspected conclusion.

* * *

Though Australian writer K. J. Bishop has published a handful of stories, *The Etched City* is her first novel, an ambitious and casually brilliant debut, erudite, lavishly written. Its unique blend of multiculturalism, political savvy, and hardnosed realism tempered by rebounding dreams and the possibility of redemptive art cries out for a new nomenclature. Though it borrows from both, this is neither heroic fantasy nor romance-fantasy chockfull of magic swords, witches, and wizards unaware. It's fantasy as high literature, our world skewed to a hard right angle, what Boris Vian, another great fantasist, meant in defining his method as "the projection of reality onto an irregulary tilting and consequently distorting plane of reference." Names such as James Branch Cabell, Lord Dunsany, Jack Vance, Jeff VanderMeer, and China Miéville come to mind in comparison.

Fleeing their pasts as freedom fighters, pursued still by agents of the regime, physician Raule and soldier-assassin Gwynn escape the Copper Country for the great river city Ashamoil. There Gwynn takes up work as cavalier for one of the ruling clans, while Raule, rejected by the city's medical establishment, signs on at a marginal clinic to care for the

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city's forgotten and misbegotten. Soon she is collecting misbirths.

"It had started with a single awry birth, of a girl with limbs like flippers....The local midwives disposed of the corpses of these infants, who were customarily killed if they did not die naturally.... [P]ig swill makers paid five farthings a pound for the scrap meat. Raule made it known that she would offer ten pence a pound."

Gwynn, meanwhile, in the crawlspace between life as a dandy and violent assertions of his master's will (including betrayal and murder of a friend), takes up with a mysterious artist and begins to find himself humanized, as in this visit to inform a mother of one child's death.

"Emila played with some blue sequins. The girl arranged them in lines, circles and zigzags. She made a spiral on the floor, then the outline of a bird.... She was doing nothing less than conjuring, out of pattern and colour, a world which conformed to her desires and obeyed her will. The boy, on the other hand, showed with the whole attitude of his being that he knew there was only the one world and he would kill it if he could."

In that moment Gwynn sees himself clear, perceives the gulf between Raule's aspirations and his own lack of same.

One of the finest of hundreds of fine scenes takes up only a page and a half. Cruising the market late at night, Gwynn and artist Beth come across a man lying on a mattress wearing only a brief loincloth. A lotus sprouts from his navel. The con is this: one pays to try and pull out the flower. But of course no one can. The roots are deep within me, the man says. Beth is amazed, Gwynn ever the skeptic.

"'You wouldn't even think about believing that it's actually growing in him, would you?' Beth asks. '...You want too little from the world, Gwynn.'"

K. J. Bishop doesn't want too little of the world. She wants *more* — which well may be why she writes. Like all great novels, hers holds up a mirror to the world, a mirror by turns reflecting true and distorting, scooping up the world's grace along with its garbage, tripping the light fantastic over tightropes and slack wires, courting dailyness and the wonders ever beneath. ☙

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Scott Bradfield provided these items as news of note:

• *Last year he was Seymour Fischer Guest Professor of Comparative Lit at the Free University of Berlin, a position previously held by Kenzaburo Oë and U.S. Poet Laureate, Robert Haas.*

• *He recently completed two books, a novel called* Good Girl Wants It Bad *and a collection of stories entitled* Men and Women in Love.

• *He likes to write stories about hot animal love.*

That last point is most relevant to the story at hand (or paw).

Doggy Love

By Scott Bradfield

Tall Dark and Furry

I FIND IT QUITE AWKWARD, all this silly writing about myself, but here goes.

I am a reasonably attractive mixed-breed Setter and Blonde Lab (on my mother's side) seeking a companionable mate in the vicinity of Regent's Park, where my master takes me most afternoons between four and five thirty. I am three years old and, while still a virgin, my genitalia remain fully intact, which has led to some rather embarrassing confrontations with my master's guests recently. Especially if they've been in contact with a female dog in the last, say, seven or eight hours.

I can't help myself. I'm quite amorous by nature.

I enjoy grooming (myself and others), television (with the sound off), and most of Hayden's late wind concertos, even though they are normally dismissed by the world's dull-as-dishwater Mozart enthusiasts. I'm not dissing Mozart, understand. I just think there were a lot of equally talented

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eighteenth-century composers running around Europe, even if their lives weren't melodramatic enough to inspire an Oscar-winning film by Milos Forman.

My ideal partner would be a mixed breed like myself, since I don't want to get into a lot of weird social games about who pisses where. She should be attractive, with a nice rump, and enjoy the same things I do, such as catching flies, and illegally bathing in the duck pond. Also, it would help if her master got along with my master, kind of like in *A Hundred and One Dalmatians*. My master, incidentally, is a very kind (and totally unattractive) human male who doesn't like living alone any more than I do. When he's not at work flogging surplus capital in the City, he lies around the house masturbating and watching Nazi documentaries on the History Channel.

No time wasters, please. Photo available on request.

***

This Lady's Not for Stroking

Dear TDF,

I joined this service as a trial member a few nights back when I came across your profile. You sound really nice and yes, I, too, live within the immediate vicinity of Regent's Park.

It feels sad joining a computer-dating service, but I'm a middle-aged bitch who has never been on a proper date in her entire life, so I've got to start somewhere.

I should mention right off that I'm not a virgin. This is due to an unfortunate week spent in the so-called "animal-friendly" Doggy-Do Kennels in West 14 when my mistress went to Barbados. It's an experience I'd just as soon not talk about right now.

I hate trying to describe myself, so I've attached a recent e-photo. Sorry my mistress is in it, but she butts into all my photos. And yes, I realize she is pretty unattractive, even for a human female. But she has a good heart and walks me twice a day. So I guess I probably love her.

I should also mention that she is American, which means brashness is part of my nature. I know it gets up British noses, but it's the way I am. So get used to it.

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As for my likes and dislikes, here goes.

I like long runs at the beach; raw meat (though I can get along fine on cereal); and lazy days lying at home on a shag carpet with a good video. I guess it's hard to describe my ideal mate since it boils down to a matter of chemistry, but I value honesty and a good sense of humor above all else. And well, okay. A great-looking rump doesn't hurt.

On the other hand, I hate phoniness and cynicism and needless cruelty to trees.

Hope to hear from you soon,
Denise

* * *

Russian Princess Seeks American Prince

Zdrastvuyte from Mother Russia, where lonely Slavic princess find herself living with great-nippled Mamma and six beautiful lesbian sisters. I am being much fond of America and its people all the time, where I would like to visit shortly, preferring it be in company of tall handsome butch American soandso. Perhaps you may find yourself this hunky pup as described?

Perhaps we become pen-pals and you help me with my troubled English?

Love,
Anastasia

P.S. My rump not so terrible for looking at neither. But why take my word for it? Check out my doggy action at wolfbitches.co.ru. And prepare yourself for hot humpy loving all night long!

* * *

Lovely

Dear Denise,

Thank you so much for your lovely photo. I had my doubts before, but perhaps this internet dating service has its merits.

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Time will tell, perhaps.

Please find attached a recent photo of myself on holiday last spring in the Lake District, a gorgeous country filled with so many brilliant smells you wouldn't believe it. I know I'm no Rin Tin Tin in the looks department, but that has never left me wanting for female admirers, since I possess many compelling natural odors which are not convertible into Rich Text Format.

Of course, this innate attraction to the opposite sex has never paid off in what might be called carnal dividends. Sure, I'm allowed to race and frolic with the ladies of Regent's Park, but once the action gets serious? My master hits me on the nose with a rolled up copy of *Private Eye*.

I loathe *Private Eye*. I don't know about you, but I genuinely loathe it.

Maybe we could meet sometime soon. My master and I usually arrive at Marylebone Green around four or four thirty.

Is your mistress persuadable?

Your New Friend,
Randall

* * *

Do You Yahoo?

Dear Randall,

I'm sorry I took so long getting back to you. My mistress was home sick and I couldn't get near the PC.

What a handsome doggy, Randall; I'm really impressed. You're definitely a lot better looking than you seem to realize. (Not that looks matter to me in the long run.)

Actually, I still have my doubts about this dating service. With the obvious exception of yourself, the only people who ever write me seem like total creeps and weirdos. Russian pornographers, cosmetic surgeons, international loan brokers, and e-perverts of every species and description. It makes you wonder about the genetic imperative, doesn't it? Reproduce or die. Is that what it's all about?

Being a single female in the big city has made me a little cynical, I guess.

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As far as an assignation, I'll see what I can do. There are two ends to every leash, as my old Mom use to say.

Love,
Denise

* * *

Doggy doggy doggy doggy

Doggy doggy doggy me love doggy doggy are me favorite me like big doggy me like strong mean doggy doggy get mad and bite me doggy get bad and chase me down and bite me hard me like big strong doggy bite me hard miaow sorry for that miaow sorry for that me a big doggy me a strong doggy and want lots of doggy love want lots of mean doggy love miaow sorry sorry big mean doggy paws are too big for master keyboard miaow love the big doggy love the big doggy doggy love me?

Please write back please send photo of big mean doggy growling hot angry all night long photo please jpg format please big doggy so hot and angry me want you so bad me very big doggy me very strong doggy please love me please.

Your obedient doggy need discipline now,
Rosco the Very Big Doggy Definitely Not a Cat miaow

* * *

A Perfect Day

Dear Denise,

What a lovely day in the park. Even if the best part only lasted a few seconds.

I love my master, and remain devoted to him. But if he ever goes near you again with that rolled up copy of *Private Eye*, I'll see to it personally that he spends the rest of his life learning to balance on one buttock.

Will write more later but I can already hear his feet on the pavement

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and smell his awful signature-odor wafting through the wobbly window-frame in the kitchen. I can't help myself.

I just start barking like crazy.

Will write more soon,
Randall

* * *

Counter-Conditioning

Dearest Randall,

What can I say? I detected a pretty convincing whiff from our correspondence but as soon as I smelled you coming across the children's playground I knew you in my bones, Randall. You make me feel like radar.

It was so perfect. The bits of Sun shining through and the green grass and the dusty pollen everywhere. Racing and snapping at each other and then you caught me (just at the moment I let you) and please, don't blame your master for getting strict with that rolled up rag. We both kind of deserved it.

That weird orange cat freaked me out, though. Slithering through the nasturtiums and peering and hissing and licking himself. What a creepy guy.

Do you think our respective masters hit it off? They hardly looked each other in the eye which, considering their appalling features, is pretty understandable. And the smell!

Can anybody figure how these creatures make love face to face?

Love,
Denise

* * *

Brainy Hunk Seeks Same or Better

As you can see from the attached photo, I m a great-looking, well-exercised, full-blooded German Shepard who believes in maintaining himself both in body and mind. As such, I spend

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large parts of the day contemplating life s impenetrable mysteries, such as the meaning of existence, or the corporate destruction of animal life. Not to mention I once caught thirty-seven Frisbees in a row at the beach.

Do you ever wonder what s really going on inside the heads of our bizarre and often useless masters? Do you ever wonder how healthy, intelligent dogs such as ourselves kept in touch before this marvelous invention called the Internet? Do you feel it s time for a revolutionary change in the cause of animal rights and I m not just talking about the poor cows and sheep being chopped up for sandwiches. I m talking about us dogs who have been unfairly restricted from attending our nation s churches, schools, and government buildings for centuries.

When was the last time you saw a dog run for Congress or Parliament? And considering the woeful state of our Western democracies, who could it hurt?

If you ever stay awake nights worrying about these and other questions, please drop me a line. And don t forget to attach a photo of your hairy posterior, just so I know our chemistry is clicking.

Love,
Rex

* * *

So Long You've Been Gone

Denise? Honey?

Every day we go to the park and you're not there. I know it's hopeless in terms of a long-term relationship. I know our masters are too hideous to develop an attachment to one another. But I can only think about tomorrow, Denise. And I need to see you.

Even if it's for only an hour or a minute.

Will I? Soon?

Love,
Randall

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Someone to Share the Magic

Dear Randall,

Can't talk now. I've been doing a little research and you won't believe what I discovered.

I feel so ashamed for all those silly, cynical things I said about Internet dating services!

Hold on, baby. We're almost home.

Love,
Denise

* * *

Oriental Beauty Seeks American Male for Much Loving

Do you often wish for lovely Oriental bitch with much loving for to give? Do you live in warm climate with many electrical appliances for personal entertainment and comfort? Do you much desire small bundle of Chinese love to cuddle in your big soft doggy bed? Me would wish enjoy such cozy doggy bed much time soon.

Perhaps you consider marriage or cross-breeding or even cohabitation with little Chinese beauty of much loving to give.

Please send photo of esteemed doggy self along with photo of sunny back yard, photo of local trees and vegetation, photo of master(s) and/or mistress(es) and especially photo of cozy doggy bed.

Me looking forward often to hearing from you much time early.

Love,
Yinyang

* * *

First Contact

Dear Reginald of Regent's Park,

Please believe that I never evinced myself in this brash manner

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previously, but I was browsing the singles websites and consequently made visual contact with your photo and profile under the mutually intriguing title, "Lonely But Loving." What a fortuitous circumstance of formidable complexity!

Perhaps you will not recall an incident of such inherent triviality, but we actually encountered one another in Regent's Park last week, or more accurately, our canine associates encountered one another in what might have developed into an unwholesome public display had you not intervened with your handy (and quite absorbing) magazine, of which I am likewise fond on many occasions.

I have considered your scent often in the many weeks since our encounter and cannot get your attractive buttocks out of my mind, but then you will have to pardon my American bravado and vocabulary. I believe you refer to it as your "bum," and might consider it gauche for a strange bitch such as myself to speak of it openly in free correspondence.

Please excuse my American candor, however, and perhaps my resultant awkwardness in formal composition regarding these matters. But I felt I must write you since it has caused me much joy to contemplate our reencounter in a park-like setting of our mutual convenience.

Perhaps I might put this more bluntly. Could we perhaps meet sometime soon? Since you are the male aggressor in such matters, I will leave the time and place to your decision utterly.

Might it not be pleasing to our canine associates to come along for the encounter? I am sure they have learned their lesson, and will not grow excessively amorous in any way disturbing to public decency, especially that of the English.

In case you are lachrymose in recalling my attractivity, I have enclosed an e-photo of my most compelling feature. Please use as you see fit, say as a screen-saver on your computer, which would remind you of my charms periodically and well-arouse your semen-delivery mechanisms.

Being a female of shy and reticent demeanor I have surprised myself fully with this open display of honesty, and ask that you kindly not remind me of such displays in future, as they might scare me away, or make me less receptive to the types of licking and sniffing I enjoy upon first greeting in an amorous style of behavior.

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Please understand that I am not a "loose woman" whatsoever, but have spent my entire life saving my passions for someone who smells just like you.

Anticipating Your Reply,
Candy

* * *

Ready for the Adventure?

Dear Denise,

What a brilliant bitch. I can't tell you how proud I am.

Bonehead has been running around all day with his head in the clouds. He can't sit still for a minute. He even bought me a new collar with these green gem-like studs. They're just colored glass, but I can't wait for you to see me in it.

My master has done himself one better. He's had a haircut, a facial, a manicure, and even started using a moisturizer.

He's still ugly as sin, and smells as bad as Lysol air freshener, but he has a good heart and I hope your mistress appreciates that sufficiently. (Not that she's any gift to nature herself, if you ask my opinion.)

I'm so excited I could piss all over the crummy linoleum. But I'm saving all I have for you!

See you in the park, muchacha!

Love, Randall

* * *

Satisfied Customer

Dear Doggylove.com,

My name is [*name withheld*] and I'm writing to thank you so much for your lovely dating service.

I guess I've always been cynical about these dealybops in the past, but that was before I met [*name withheld*] and found out how wonderful true love can be.

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It seems like only weeks ago we were living in our separate domiciles, chewing our crunchy biscuits and moping, with nothing more exciting to look forward to than a scratch behind the ear from one of our sad, homely masters. Then we joined doggylove.com and our lives were transformed into a magical miracle of romance.

Even our masters got in on the act, mated, engendered an offspring, and bought a house in the country, to which we will be transporting our doggy beds in just a few days. We can't wait to get there and piss on all the trees!

Not to mention have a litter of our own and raise them in open harmony with nature, much like in the concluding scenes of our favorite movie, *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*.

Sometimes I turn to [*name withheld*] in the night and say to him, "Honey, bite me on the rump. I must be dreaming!"

And [*name withheld*] always does exactly what I ask. Because, of course, he truly cares.

Oh, there's the occasional gray cloud. For example, my mistress just bought my master a lifetime subscription to *Private Eye* for his birthday. (It's a long story.) But we take the good with the bad, I guess.

It's the price you pay for love.

Yours sincerely,
Lost in Heaven

* * *

Editorial reply:

Dear Lost in Heaven,

Thanks so much for sharing your positive, life-affirming experiences with the rapidly expanding membership of doggylove.com, which has recently opened branches in Germany, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines. All over our exciting planet, canines are coming together to share their unique passions for giving and living. Why delay any longer? Extend your membership now to Doggy Silver, Doggy Gold, or even Doggy Lifetime Platinum, which entitles you to a 20 percent annual discount off the prevailing rate.

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And that's not all. Very soon we'll be sending our compassionate, discreet, and highly trained representatives to your local neighborhood to present one-of-a-kind seminars in achieving canine bliss through group interaction and sensual massage. And once this silly crisis of faith in broad-belt Internet stocks has blown over, we'll go public, substantially increasing our cash-flow. This will mean introducing our customers to a wide new range of Doggy Love services, such as package cruises, erotic lingerie, and more of those scratch-and-sniff supplements you enjoy so much.

Remember, romance isn't something cooked up by your ugly master to get you to roll over and play dead. It's not barking at birds in the yard, or licking yourself on the sofa. Love is everywhere, even flittering through the world's increasingly interdependent communications media.

So go get the love you need! Don't settle for second best! Or you'll find yourself lying alone someday in a smelly basement with nothing but a red rubber chew toy to keep you warm.

As our Co-Founder and Senior Board Member, Roscoe the Big Mean Doggy, likes to say:

Have faith in someone besides yourself,
no matter what they tell you,
no matter how they smell —

So until next week, happy sniffing to all you hunky dudes and bitches!

Miaow!

(Ooops, stupid keyboard. Let's run by that again.)

Woof woof.

And love don't come truer than that.

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John Langan says that the bulk of his recent writing has been directed towards grant applications concerning a SF/Fantasy/Horror conference planned for Spring of 2004 at the State University of New York at New Paltz. And indeed, you will see the influence of Mr. Langan's academic background in this story, a tale that might well be considered the epitome of writerly horror stories. All you students on summer vacation will be itching to get back to class after reading this one...

Tutorial

By John Langan

ASKED TO DESCRIBE THE writing tutor, James would have written, "To say the man was fat would have been not so much inaccurate as incomplete. The man was fat: no euphemisms would hide the collar of flesh encircling his neck; the sleeves of skin draping his arms; the great waistcoat of stomach bunched in front of him. But there are, after all, many ways to be fat, many ways to wear one's excess. Flesh magnifies who we are already: who has never met the archetypal happy fat man, whose bulk seems so much compacted jollity? and who has not encountered the large angry man whose mass is a thundercloud trembling on the brink of explosion? This man, then, was a particularly tremulous kind of fat: the skin rolled down his frame in an arrested avalanche, giving the impression that, at an undisclosed future moment, his body would fall away from him in a crashing rush. For all his size, there was something strangely hollow, insubstantial, about this man, as if he were a giant bubble or cluster of bubbles, dangerously close to bursting." James would have tried to capture the peculiar way that the man's very bulk contributed to the

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impression of his fragility before moving on to his crewcut head, to the round, sweat-rimmed glasses pressing into his face, to the mouth pursing as he read through the paper on his desk. He would have elaborated on the tutor's white button-down shirt, the black plastic wristwatch tourniquetting his left wrist; all in all, James reckoned he could have spent a good page or two of single-spaced, ten-point type on this man, whose name he thought was Sean but wasn't sure.

And, he thought sourly, his creative writing professor — Privates, as he secretly called him, after his most famous novel, *The Private Visitor*, which James had read and renamed *The Visitor's Privates* — would have returned those pages looking as they always did, as if they had been bled on, scoring out words, phrases, paragraphs, the occasional page; filling the margins with assorted question marks and exclamation points; ending with a block-capital reproof: "HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU, MR. WILLIAMSON, THAT PROSE IS ARCHITECTURE, NOT INTERIOR DECORATION? YOU ARE, I REMIND YOU, A TYRO. ACCEPT THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW ANYTHING AND WRITE ABOUT IT CLEARLY. THE BAROQUE IS OVER." It had been the same with each of the five weekly assignments James had submitted so far, each story returned scored and scarred and, despite himself, James with it. His ideas, the professor wrote, were absurd: "Science Fiction and Fantasy stories are the province of the perpetual adolescent"; "Horror stories are meant for groups of drunken teenagers sitting around the campfire, not the printed page." Nor was Privates enamored of James's style: "Read Strunk and White, Mr. Williamson, and learn to Omit Needless Words." The trend had culminated in his creative writing professor's insistence that he consult the tutoring center to see if they could help him with his absolutely unmanageable syntax, his extraordinary and ridiculous tropes. James had been the only member of Creative Writing I singled out for a visit to The Writing Scene, which distinction Privates had shared with the rest of the class. Had he not been teetering on the brink of failing this class that was supposed to be the cornerstone of his prospective major in Creative Writing, James would have refused, stolen a line from a favorite story and told the professor he would prefer not to. As it was, his string of D-minuses had led him here, to the sub-sub-basement of the Humanities Building.

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With a snort, the tutor looked up from James's paper. "Well," he said in a voice that James thought surprisingly nasal for a man with such a small nose. "Well well well." The tutor had placed his hands palm-down on his desk as he was reading; now they fluttered up from it, as if trying to break off and fly away.

James said nothing: he might have no choice about coming here, but that didn't necessitate his being excessively cooperative. On the wall behind him, a clock chopped off the seconds. He glanced at the bare white walls to either side of him, behind the tutor. Overhead, fluorescent lights hummed and snapped.

The tutor (Sean?) cleared his throat and asked, "What was the assignment?"

"To write about loss," James said.

"Loss, yes." He raised one hand, passed it over James's paper. "And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen from him by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's an accurate summary?"

"It's a kind of fable," James said, shifting in his molded plastic seat.

"A fable, yes. How very interesting. Is that what you write, Mr. — Williamson? Fables?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I write other things."

"Such as?"

James shrugged. "Science fiction, fantasy, horror: that kind of stuff."

"Mmm. Not much for realism, then?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Oh?"

"There are more ways to be realistic than writing about frustrated professors lusting after their students." Which was, James thought acidly, Privates's entire career summarized in twenty words or less.

Sean(?) blinked. "You don't say."

"Yeah: there's emotional realism, psychological realism, moral realism, aesthetic realism."

"Right," the tutor said. "And you expect to achieve this by writing about a man who has his heart cut out."

"I want to use metaphor."

"Ahh, metaphor. You do love your metaphors, it's true; to a fault, I would say."

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"What's wrong with metaphors?" James asked.

"Used sparingly and judiciously, nothing. But yours are rather baroque, aren't they?"

"If you say so."

The tutor frowned. "Maybe we could try a writing exercise."

"All right."

"Let's look at one of your sentences." Sean(?)'s hands moved over James's story, as if to catch a sentence by the tail and hold it up for inspection. He stabbed the middle of the page with his finger: "This one should do. 'Carl turned the doorknob, feeling as he did so a deep, unreasoning dread for which he could not account, since, although he did not know who had rung the doorbell, he had no reason for suspecting it to be anything more than the mailman, or another of the peregrinating Christian missionaries who appeared from time to time offering salvation; nonetheless, as he swung open the front door, he felt the same sensation he had that day in the hospital when he had seen the doctor walking toward him and had known that the news about his father was bad.' Whew!" Sean? — say Sean — laughed, "That's quite a sentence."

"Yes it is," James said stiffly.

"Let's be honest: it runs on a bit. At the very least, it could use a period or two to break it up into more manageable units. Really, though, it's in dire need of pruning, wouldn't you say? So: can you tell me how you might shorten it?"

"No."

"No?"

"I wouldn't shorten it. I'm happy with it the way it is."

"You don't think it gives your reader any trouble?"

"In what way?"

"There is the matter of clarity."

"Define clarity."

The tutor frowned. "Mr. Williamson, you're being quite difficult — "

"I'm not," James said. "I'm just asking you to define what constitutes clarity in writing."

"Ease of comprehension. Will that do for you?"

"What couldn't you understand about that sentence?"

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"Well, it wasn't that I couldn't — I mean, your style is rather tortured — "

"'Tortured'?" James echoed, leaning forward. "How is my style 'tortured'?"

Laughing, waving his hands, Sean said, "Obviously, you've never heard of Strunk and White."

"I've read *The Elements of Style*."

"You'd never know it, to read your writing. What happened to 'Omit Needless Words'?"

"I think it's crap."

He might as well have reached across the desk and slapped the tutor. "Excuse me?"

"I said I think it's crap. I suppose Strunk and White is okay if you're a technical writer — or if you're writing papers for classes, that kind of thing. But I can't see that it's got anything to do with writing fiction."

"You've never heard of having to learn the rules before you can break them?"

"Which rules? Whose rules?"

"The rules all the great writers followed."

"All of them? What about Henry James? H.P. Lovecraft? Samuel Delany? How would Strunk and White help them?"

"Samuel who?"

"Delany." When the tutor continued to stare at him, James added, "He writes science fiction."

"Which explains why I've never heard of him."

"What about James, then? Or haven't you heard of him?"

"Who reads Henry James, anymore?"

"I do. Enough people do to keep his books in print."

"Graduate students and professors."

"People who aren't afraid of a challenge."

"You like to argue, I see."

"I know what I like and I know why I do what I do."

Sean shook his head and pushed his fingers up under his glasses, squeezing the bridge of his nose. He said, "I don't think you're ready for the help I could give you. I think you need to see one of the other tutors."

"Sure, if that's what you think." James reclined in his chair.

"Here," the tutor said, holding out James's paper as if he were a

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butcher and it a poor cut of meat. "I'm referring you to Raymond: go out of this office, turn left, and take the stairs in front of you. You'll find his office at the foot of the stairs."

"There's more to this place?" James asked. "I didn't know Humanities had a sub-sub-basement, let alone, what? a sub-sub-sub-basement? What is this," gesturing at the small room with his paper, "an old fallout shelter?"

Sean shook his head. "I just work here."

"Okay," James said. "I guess I'll be on my way, then. Thanks for your time." He walked out of the office, turned left, and saw the stairway leading down. At the top of the stairs, he thought he heard Sean call something to him. He paused, listening, then returned to the office and leaned his head in the doorway. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

The room was empty. The tutor had vanished, leaving the four white walls, the black desk and molded chairs, the clock on the wall hacking away at time. Above, the fluorescent lights buzzed and flickered, and James thought of a stage the moment after the actors have abandoned it. Sean must have slipped out while his back had been turned, shouting whatever he had shouted as he was climbing the stairs that had brought James here. Hard to believe the man could have departed with such speed and quiet; perhaps there was another door James wasn't aware of, some kind of hidden passage built into the walls when this place had been a fallout shelter. If it had served as a shelter: had he seen the old radiation signs upstairs? He couldn't remember. No matter: the tutor had left and he hadn't heard him; that was all. James turned again to the stairs to the sub-sub-sub-basement, wondering what Sean had said. It couldn't have been, "You'll wish for my time soon enough"; that didn't make any sense.

Maybe he shouldn't have given the poor guy such a hard time, James thought as his sneakers slapped concrete, the echoes chasing each other up and down the dim stairwell. It might have been easier — quicker, anyway — to nod, smile, be polite, listen to whatever pearls of idiocy the tutor had to cast before him, and then get the hell out of Dodge and go back to doing what he'd been doing. Damnit, though, this had been too much; it had been the clichéd straw that snapped the camel's back. To be fair, Sean couldn't know that he was only the latest link in a chain stretching

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back through Privates to James's mother, who had met his declaration that he wanted to be a writer with, "That's nice, dear, but how are you going to make any money?" It was a chain whose first link had been forged when he was a high school freshman and had won the spring writing contest with a story about a family being pursued by the ghost of the grandfather they'd neglected to death. The story had earned him a check for ten dollars, publication in the school newspaper, and an extended lecture from his father one car-ride home during which his dad had told him that this was not the kind of thing he wanted to see James writing, this was not who he was, this Stephen King stuff. He couldn't stop James reading the stuff, though God only knew what he found in it, but he was not going to have his son writing it. James had sat in the passenger seat of the family car, a cavernous Ford LTD, feeling whatever modicum of triumph had seemed his evaporating under the withering heat of his father's dismissal.

He had felt that same heat sitting in Privates's class, which he had walked into on the first day of school with the relief of a man lost in the desert who finally stumbles into an oasis. At last, he would have an audience for the stories he had been discreetly writing for the last four years. At last, he would be surrounded by people who believed in writing, who didn't suspect it, view it as something best avoided by decent folk. But the oasis was a mirage, he had learned as the creative writing professor discussed and dismembered James's fiction to the other students, some of whom sought to jab their own barbed remarks. He had endured the slashing of his sentences, the dissection of his vocabulary, the evisceration of his plots. Privates ran his class like a standup comedian conducting the Spanish Inquisition: he prowled the front of the room, James's latest story crumpled in one hand, the other locked into an accusatory point that stabbed at the pages in his hand, at James, at whoever wanted to join the bloodbath. The classroom lights shone on his extended forehead. Privates's voice was always angry; it bit off words and snarled phrases; so his analyses of James's work sounded more like rant than reason. James left class feeling as if every last inch of skin had been flayed from him.

All of which meant that, faced with the likes of Sean, James was not about to roll over and play dead. He wasn't going to prove anything to the tutor, but neither did he have to pretend that Sean's prejudices were

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anything more than that. No doubt, he should have reserved his remarks for Privates; in class, though, his tongue died in his mouth: he was unable to think of an answer to the professor until hours, sometimes days, after the initial carnage. And a small, cowardly part of himself that he despised counseled, it was probably best not to make too much of an enemy of Privates: the Creative Writing program here at SUNY Huguenot was small, and the chances were better than even he was going to encounter the professor again, especially if he majored, or even minored, in Creative Writing. A panicked thought from that cowardly corner: would the tutor pass along James's assorted remarks to Privates? Privates was a big fan of Strunk and White: their slender beige volume occupied a privileged place on his course syllabus, and he invoked their names with the regularity of a devotee naming his god. James didn't know if the tutors were responsible for filing reports with the professors who referred students to them; he supposed so. Well, he hadn't said anything that damning, had he? ("I think it's crap.") Nothing that couldn't be retracted, at least.

God, these stairs went down deep. He was fairly sure he'd descended twice as far as he had to reach Sean's office. He couldn't say much for the lighting, either: if the school were going to ask students to use these facilities, it had better provide more than a single bulb set high in the wall every fifty feet or so; if it wanted to avoid a lawsuit, that was. He literally could not see the stairs in front of him, and had to rely on a guardrail whose surface flaked away beneath his skin.

There: his destination lay ahead of him, a rectangle of light across the sub-sub-sub-basement landing. Wondering if he truly had reached the Humanities building's lowest level, James glanced about, searching for another set of stairs leading still further into the earth. No: nothing he could see, anyway. From within the lighted doorway, a voice called, "Come in, Mr. Williamson."

If James could have spent one to two pages of single-spaced, ten-point type describing the first tutor, he could have consumed twice that dwelling on the second. He could see the sentences racing across his computer screen: "Everything about this man came to a point: from the widow's peak shaping his crewcut into a wedge, to the narrow nose jutting out of his face like the prow of an icebreaker; from the tapered goatee sharpening his chin, to the long surgeon's fingers steepled under it; from

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the bat-like ears, to the prominent cheekbones threatening to tear through the skin stretched taut over them. His eyes — dark, liquid brown, protruding — were a pair of drill bits set in their sockets, and his gaze passed over you the way a barber might strop his straight razor. His mouth was a single dramatic slash cut into his flesh.

"He curved across his desk at you, this man, not in the tired slouch of an underpaid civil servant, but in a rigid, trembling arc, much the way a weapon, a knife, a scimitar, might point curving in your direction, the light playing on its polished sides. He gave the impression of having been carved whole from a block of something: from a single, giant tooth, you thought as you looked at him, from the tooth of a leviathan, of a monster from the lower depths. His features, fine as they were, were no more than scrimshaw tracing the surface of a great fang whose serrated edges were visible just out of the corners of your eyes. You felt the paint was cracking, beginning to peel off, and you felt equally that the man in front of you did not mind that in the least, would be only too happy to brush off the last colors of his disguise and stand for all to see in his awful whiteness." Which was to say nothing of the tutor's clothes, of the white, button-down shirt whose creases were so sharp they sliced the eye looking at them, of the black suspenders that bit into his shoulders, of the black plastic watch that blemished his left wrist.

The office, too, James thought as he gave his paper into the tutor's outstretched hand and seated himself in a molded plastic chair, would demand pages. Where Sean's had been bare beyond the point of minimalism, this one was decorated with a distinctive taste. Raymond's desk was an oaken monster that would have been more at home dominating the office of the university's president. Its top was crowded by a half dozen piles of paper, each one held in place by a slender steel spike onto which it had been jammed like an oversized moth. Behind the desk to either side was a file cabinet: the top drawer of the one to James's left was open, and was that a human skull sitting on top of the cabinet? Surely it was some kind of medical model. Averting his gaze from its empty stare, James saw that the other file cabinet was crowned by a trio of mason jars filled with a thick, greenish-yellow liquid in which floated objects whose identities he was too far away to discern clearly. Plaques of all shapes and sizes crowded the office's walls, each one offering a different motto: "I AM ASKED IF

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UNIVERSITY CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS STIFLE YOUNG WRITERS. IN MY OPINION, THEY DO NOT STIFLE ENOUGH OF THEM." "PROSE IS ARCHITECTURE, NOT INTERIOR DECORATION." "SLAUGHTER YOUR DARLINGS." "OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS." "THE BAROQUE IS OVER." "CUT WHAT CAN BE CUT, THEN CUT AGAIN." He had heard, he reflected, most of these platitudes uttered by Privates. What is this, he thought amusedly, a conspiracy? Nestled amidst the various plaques were photographs of skulls, which appeared to have been cut from biology and medical textbooks and thumbtacked to the wall. To his back, a clock steadily struck off seconds; overhead, fluorescent lights hummed.

The tutor turned a page, drawing James's attention back to him. Raymond read hanging over the paper, his head jerking back and forth in minute motions that reminded James of a bird, a raven or crow, pecking at a carcass. He didn't take long to arrive at the end of James's story, and, when he did, he looked up across his desk, fighting the smirk twisting his lips, and said, "Well. Well well well." When James failed to reply, he went on, "What was the assignment?"

"To write about loss," James said.

"Loss, yes. And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen from him by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's a fairly accurate summary?"

Hadn't Sean said something similar? "I'd say that's fairly accurate," James replied. Maybe there was a script the tutors were supposed to follow.

"And," Raymond flipped through James's paper, "judging from your professor's comments, he wasn't too taken with what you wrote."

Flushing, James said, "You could say that."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because it isn't what he wants," James said after a moment. "It isn't what he thinks a story should be."

"I'm not sure I agree, but let's suppose I did. What do you think your professor thinks a story should be?"

James sighed and quoted, "'A story is a self-contained organic unity that offers the reader a brief snapshot of reality. Through indirection and understatement, it relates the process whereby its protagonist achieves a

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momentary insight, called an epiphany.' That was what he told us on the first day of class, and it's what he's told us every class since then."

"That's not a bad definition, is it?" Despite his sharp edges, the tutor, James thought, had the bright, wide-eyed manner and voice of a children's TV show host, plastically pleasant.

"It's not bad: it's just incomplete."

"How so?"

"There's more than one kind of story."

"Of course," Raymond said, "but what's wrong with learning the basics before moving on to other things?"

"They aren't the basics," James said. "The basics vary according to what you're trying to do."

"I'm not sure this is getting us anywhere: let's come back to it. Try this: what would you say is the point to what you've written?"

"What do you mean?"

"One could argue for what you've written as a form of allegory or symbolism: debased modes, to be sure, but possessed of a certain history. So I'm asking you: What is your system? What is it your story encodes, what worldview, what philosophy?"

"That isn't what I'm doing."

"I didn't think so." The tutor shook his head sadly. "If you can't justify your writing that way, then how about as entertainment, as escapism?"

"I'm not doing that, either."

"What are you doing, then?"

James shifted in his seat. "I'm trying to use non-realistic techniques to write about reality. It's like that Emily Dickinson poem, you know: 'Tell the truth — / But tell it slant — / Success in circuit lies.'"

"Most readers spend their days slogging through reality," Raymond said, "they don't read this kind of writing to be splattered with it."

"I don't accept that. I don't see why this fiction can't do everything any other kind of fiction can."

"It isn't suited for it," the tutor said. "Everything about a story like yours tells the reader that it should have nothing to do with the real world. It should be a doorway to another place, a kind of holiday for the mind."

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"You're wrong."

The tutor blinked, and his eyes seemed to grow sharper, the plastic façade slip ever so slightly. "Oh?"

Nodding, James said, "Look at Samuel Delany. Look at Theodore Sturgeon. Look at Ramsey Campbell. There are any number of writers who prove that you can write this kind of stuff and still do serious, literary work."

"I'm not sure this is getting us anywhere," Raymond said, "let's come back to it. There's the matter of your style."

Crossing his arms, James said, "What about my style?"

"It's a bit much, isn't it? What's the word your professor used?...Ah, yes, 'murky.' I think that about hits the nail on the head, wouldn't you say? Of course not," Raymond added when James said nothing. "You disagree with such an assessment."

"I do."

"To be perfectly honest, I can't see how. Surely even you can't think your writing is clear. Listen to this line — where is it? — 'Slowly, with the care with which you would withdraw a splinter from a wound, the trench-coated figure withdrew its blood-soaked hand from the gaping ruin that had been Carl's chest, its palm rich with the piece of throbbing meat that Carl saw with shock was his still-beating heart.'" The tutor ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know where to begin with such a sentence. It sprawls all over the place. You start with that adverb, and then you follow it with an adverbial clause, and then you follow all that with an adjective. And the repetition! It takes a day and a half for the reader to reach the sentence's subject. Your writing meanders: it wants to stop and smell every single daisy on its way to its destination. 'Omit Needless Words': your professor has written that all over your paper, and I have to concur. I can't think of better advice for you."

Frustration welled in James's chest. If he had not rolled over for Sean, he would be damned if he would for this guy. "It's challenging, yeah, but that's the idea."

"What's the point of such a challenge, though? It obstructs the reading of the story."

"Why can't it be part of reading the story? Why can't part of your experience be the language itself?"

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"That isn't what writing is supposed to do: it's the medium, not the message."

"Why can't it be?"

Raymond's eyes narrowed, and James had the feeling the tutor's plastic pleasantness was in peril of slipping. "Perhaps a visual aid would be useful here," Raymond said, standing and reaching back to the cabinet on his right. His spidery fingers found the skull sitting there, closed on it, lifted and carried it forward to his desk, where he set it on top of James's story. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"A skull."

"Structure, Mr. Williamson, structure!" The tutor hissed the word, his fingers caressing the dull ivory hemisphere. "Without this, you are a puddle of organs. What good is a heart without a ribcage to hang it in, a brain without a skull to keep it safe?"

"But without those organs," James said, "your skeleton is so much calcium."

Raymond knocked on the bone. "This endures. Structure lasts; whereas flesh, ornament, decays, runs to rot and ruin. Decoration is distraction: you must learn that. It's self-indulgence, a trap. It's like stained glass. How many grand structures have I seen ruined by stained glass, by those windows winking in the sunlight, drawing attention away from what is important, from the form, the architecture. Break the stained glass windows!" Raymond shouted, "Smash the gargoyles clustered on the ledges! Scrape off the paintings on the walls! Throw over the altar! Get rid of all of it! Clean it out! Strunk and White," he concluded, quieting, "it's all there for you in Strunk and White. Structure." Cradling the skull in both hands, he held it up before him like an imitation Hamlet, gazing lovingly at its stark grin. James half-expected him to quote the famous play. He did not expect the tutor to bring the skull in to his mouth, extending his tongue as he did so. Raymond's tongue was sharp, pink, and wet, and he ran it up the center of the skull, which he turned in his hands so that his tongue traversed it from brow to nape. Shocked, James sat watching, unable to offer a suitable response. When he was finished, the tutor returned the skull to its place on the file cabinet and slumped in his seat. His eyes were glazed. "Strunk and White," he said thickly.

"So I've heard," James said nervously.

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"You'd do well to listen."

"I'm afraid I don't have much use for the little beige book."

"I can't say I'm surprised." Raymond smirked.

"Yeah, well, to each his own, right?"

"Wrong," Raymond said, his voice the rasp of a blade leaving its sheath. The mask had come loose.

"Excuse me?"

"There are consequences. There are penalties for refusing to follow the rules."

"I know: Did you see my grade?"

"Much worse things than grades lie in store for you."

"I'm sorry?"

"You will be. Yes, you most certainly will be. I have no doubt about that, nor should you. The things that are waiting for you.... Sadly, I can't administer them. It's my duty to be reasonable, to try to persuade you to good sense through careful debate. What comes after I fail is left to the devices of the Editor."

"The Editor?"

"Yes. I believe I've done all I can for you. He will take it from here. It's almost a pity: you could have learned; I could have taught you. I could have helped you build the edifice of your future. I could have helped you construct something that would last."

"I think I've had enough for tonight," James said. Suddenly, he was nervous, his leg bouncing up and down restlessly, his palms moist. It was the kind of unease he had last felt living at home, when confrontation with his father loomed and he sat in his room trying to read a book, unable to concentrate on the words for listening for the crunch of tires on gravel that would announce his dad's return from work and their imminent argument.

"Almost," Raymond said. He held out James's paper as a surgeon might hold out a freshly-excised tumor, all pretense at pleasantry long gone. "You'll find the Editor's office at the bottom of the stairs."

Taking his paper, James said, "I thought this was the bottom of the stairs."

"Oh, no: you'll find these stairs go down quite far."

"Honestly, I don't think there's any point in my taking up anyone

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else's time," James repeated, rising from his chair and backing toward the door. "You think what you think, I think what I think, and there you have it, right?"

"You will see the Editor. He's waiting for you."

"I guess he gets an early night, then."

"He is waiting for you."

Without another word, James turned and walked out the door. The stairway was directly in front of him. When he went to step up, though, his foot swept through empty space and he had to grab the handrail to stop from toppling headlong down the stairs descending before him. He leapt back, mouth dry. What the hell was this? He looked around furiously. There were no other entrances or exits visible; this had to be the staircase that had brought him here. Now, there were only stairs sinking still deeper into the ground. Voice cracking, he shouted, "What the hell is this?"

"He's waiting for you," Raymond called back. A shape darkened the tutor's doorway; James turned to see what the man wanted.

What he saw sent him stumble-rushing headlong down the stairs so fast he was rounding the midway landing and pounding toward the Editor's office before he even could start thinking about what had bulked in the entrance. The light had been behind it, so James had had difficulty distinguishing much more than a silhouette, but that had been enough. The figure standing there had appeared at once an enormous, dark bird, with shining eyes and glistening plumage, and something else, a mountainous heap with quivering, jagged edges. Whatever it was, the sight of it had dashed James's mind to the floor like a china plate; his only coherent thought, What the hell?, repeating like a neon sign steadily blinking on and off. Instinct filled in the gap, sent him flying down the stairs. Were those footsteps behind him? The echo of his sneakers in the stairwell was too loud for him to tell. So focused was he on possible pursuit that the stairway's gradual turning to the right, transforming it into a spiral, registered only peripherally. James reached the foot of the stairs, saw the lighted doorway across from him, and, still in the grip of instinct, not thinking that he had been less than keen to be here just a few minutes prior, raced through it into the Editor's office.

It was too late for such thoughts in any event: the Editor was half-standing from his chair and saying, "Come in, Mr. Williamson," one hand

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out for the paper James thrust into it reflexively. Chest heaving, blood pounding, James collapsed into a molded plastic chair. Not unkindly, the Editor said, "You don't sound too well."

"There was — upstairs — Raymond's office — Raymond," James panted.

"Ah, Raymond," the Editor said. "You saw him."

"Yes," James nodded, "Raymond." What had he seen?

The Editor turned his attention to James's paper. Thoughts swirling (a bird? a...?), James watched him. As had been the case with the tutors, there was material here for writing; a distant part of his mind recognized that. But any facility with language he possessed was gone, stunned if not smashed by the dark thing in the doorway, leaving him powerless to describe the man sitting across the desk from him. Where to begin? The Editor's tweed jacket? It looked slightly worn, but otherwise unremarkable. His white, button-down shirt? Similarly unremarkable. Bland as his clothes were, though, there was something about them that nagged the eye. They didn't seem to fit particularly well, James decided after a minute. (A bird?) It wasn't so much that they were too big or too small, as that they appeared the wrong shape for the person wearing them. There were, James saw as he peered more closely, strange lumps pressing against the jacket's sleeves, its shoulders, as if the skin beneath were host to a forest of tumors. The stripes in the tweed helped to disguise the deformity, but once it became apparent to you, it was inescapable. Likewise, the Editor's face and hands were suspect. With a shock, James realized that the Editor had the same face as Privates: the high forehead, the watery eyes, the pug nose — but a Privates at least ten years younger, still riding the success of his lone single bestseller. His hair was black, shining. His skin was tanned a rich orange-brown, but it looked more like a layer of makeup that had been smeared onto his flesh than the result of hours spent under the Sun. This wasn't his professor, but the resemblance was sufficiently uncanny for James to look away, at the office.

A series of plain bookcases traversed the walls, each standing about three feet high, each with three shelves filled with row after row of the same narrow beige book: Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, repeated over and over again. The tops of the bookcases were crowded with an assortment of letter openers, each in the form of a different kind of sword.

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Broadswords rested next to scimitars, sabers to cutlasses. Above the bookcases, framed photographs showed Roman arenas in various states of disrepair. Behind him, the click of the clock severed one second from the next; overhead, fluorescent lights buzzed.

"Well," said the Editor, looking up from James's story. "Well well well." When James did not respond, he proceeded, "What was the assignment?"

For the third time that night, James said, "To write about loss."

"Loss, yes. And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's an accurate summary?"

James stared at the Editor. Somewhere tonight, he thought, he had stepped through the proverbial looking glass, dropped down the rabbit hole. When had that happened? Had it been when he had sat down with Sean? Or had it been the moment he had opened the door to The Writing Scene and stepped across the threshold?

The Editor said, "I think that's a fair assessment of what you've written, and since I don't hear you disagreeing, I'll assume you do, too. I see no point in wasting my time or yours, Mr. Williamson. I don't know about you, but I am very busy, very very busy. I want to cut to the chase. You're here because other techniques have proved ineffectual. Shame and reason work well in many cases, but there are always a few recalcitrant souls who require more elaborate treatment. That's where I step in. I'm direct and I'm efficient. Do you speak French, Mr. Williamson?"

"French? No, not really: I took it in high school, but — "

"You would have no idea what I was talking about if I said, *'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte,'* then, would you?"

"'There isn't — there' — could you repeat that?"

"'There is nothing outside the text,'" the Editor said. "Don't feel too bad, Mr. Williamson: the man who wrote those words has no idea of their true meaning, either. There is nothing outside the text. Nothing at all. Everything is textual; everything is made of words. Everything is language. Can you think a thought without language? Impossible."

"That isn't true: there are feelings."

"And the minute you feel whatever rarefied emotion you would offer as your example, you put a name to it. You may not call it 'anger' or 'joy';

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you may call it, 'Way that my heart swells in my chest when I see the Sun rise over the ocean.' It doesn't matter: which ever way you turn, you are caught in language's web. Please don't waste my time with arguments," the Editor said, raising a hand as James went to speak. "If you can't accept this, it isn't my problem, any more so than if you couldn't accept gravity. Your refusal to believe the condition of reality does not make it any less real.

"If everything is textual, Mr. Williamson, then I'm sure you'll agree that the way we use language has tremendous consequence. It portends more than you, no doubt, have imagined; it portends more than you can imagine. If we wish to be clean and pure, then our language must be clean and pure. You cannot have one without the other. An orderly world requires an orderly language. Such things as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, bring disorder; even a comparison so seemingly simple as, 'My love is like a red, red rose,' spawns meanings that run off in all directions. It is for this reason that such language is to be abhorred. It cannot be excised entirely, dream though I do of such an accomplishment, but it can be discouraged, diminished, contained. And writing that makes use of these same figures at length, writing such as this," the Editor gestured at James's story, "that wallows in it, also can be discouraged, diminished, contained. We cannot eradicate what you do, Mr. Williamson, but we can keep it in a safe place.

"For such an arrangement to succeed, however, both parties must agree to it. Both sides must play by the same rules. You are not playing by the rules, my young friend, and that is causing problems. Scratch that: it could cause problems, if we let it proceed too far. We've made that mistake in the past, not intervening until it was too late, and what never should have seen the light of day was being reviewed on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*. It takes a long time to repair that kind of damage, years and sometimes decades to corral such works. It was for this reason that we began our move into the university system, in an effort to nip future problems in the bud, to instruct you and your fellows in the rules of the game while there was still time for them to be effective."

Shaking his head, James said, "You're losing me. What are you saying, that you're some kind of government agency? Are you connected to the NEA?"

The Editor laughed, the sound of a guillotine dropping. "No, Mr.

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Williamson, we're a bit more than a government agency, quite a bit more, if I may say so; though we have had some spectacular successes with the NEA. Our role is more prestigious than mere government. We are in the service of They Who Walk Between; our Masters swim the — well, it's all rather much for you to comprehend, really. We are the vassals of those forces that seek order, that long for cleanliness. We serve those who seek the straight line, the unencumbered way, the direct path. We do our part to make of this place a more suitable abode for them; they, in turn, bestow on us such morsels of their power as we can accept."

James had the feeling that he wasn't hearing the Editor's words completely, that there was a critical component to them that was eluding him. He knew what he thought the tanned man across from him was saying, but that couldn't be right. His mind still must be piecing itself together from whatever it was he had seen upstairs. (A bird? A...?) Trying not to sound as stupid as he felt, he asked, "So, it's an international thing? You're part of a multinational corporation? And you're running a tutoring center at a small college in upstate New York?" His voice could not disguise his skepticism.

"As of this moment, we are affiliated with thirty-four colleges and universities in schools ranging up and down the country. We have plans to expand. As for our involvement in such mundane places as the State University of New York at Huguenot: think, Mr. Williamson, think! Why is it that, when a dictator seizes power, the first thing he does is to order all the poets lined up and shot? Why do you suppose that is? Because there's no surer shot than a poet? Of course not. They do so because they understand the power that is writing. Your ancestors believed words were magic, and they were right. If everything is textual, then each and every word is a component of reality, and collections of them have the ability to shape existence."

"Why not follow those dictators' leads, then, and have all the writers executed?" James asked. "For the sake of argument."

"Because such actions always and inevitably have the opposite effect. Want to make a novel a bestseller overnight? Assassinate its author. Want to put a poem on the lips of every man, woman, and child for two hundred miles around? Cut the poet's throat. Much as we might like to hang everyone who's ever written so much as a grocery list up by the thumbs

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and eviscerate him, I'm afraid more subtle means are required to bring the magic that is language under control."

"Shame and reason?"

"Very good, Mr. Williamson, very good."

"Although Raymond wasn't very reasonable, not really." [What had he seen?]

"The appearance of reason is all that is required," the Editor said. "Indeed, it's more than sufficient for the majority. Cloak your opinion in the tone of rationality and it will be accepted."

James wondered if he were having a breakdown, if the entire night had been an extended and elaborate hallucination. He said, "I still don't understand, I guess. You've just finished telling me how powerful I am: what makes you think that I'm going to change my writing to suit you, or anyone else, for that matter?"

"You could be powerful," the Editor corrected. "Potential does not equal being. As of this moment, you're less than nobody. The stream of pages that pours from your word processor could dry up tomorrow and never be missed. Of course, we don't want the situation to come to that. You are of far more use to us alive than...anything else. There is a place for you and what you do; I simply intend to help you find it and to keep within its borders. My Masters, you see, have their existence only partially in this material world. Indeed, the greater part of their essence lives, moves, and has its being at a level more abstract than you can conceive. On their plane, they move with the majesty of great whales in the ocean. They are...for them to descend to this place," the Editor waved his hand, "requires that, on that abstract, intangible level, conditions be as calm, as orderly, as possible. It is, I suppose, one of their few liabilities, their susceptibility to the turbulence of human thought. The more stilled the mass of such thoughts, the more of themselves my Masters can bring to it. And the more of my Masters here, the more they can help us in our quest to bring order to this filthy ball of muck. This is why we insist that everything be in its place. We cannot remove the human need for entertainment, but we have discovered that we don't need to. We can do something better: we can channel it into set forms, into configurations familiar and comfortable. We can take a dangerous stimulant, and make of it a narcotic.

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"Needless to say, I recognize that a certain amount of intimidation and force will be required to achieve my stated goal. But that is the part I play."

"Wait," James said, holding up his hands as if to prevent the Editor from lunging at him, "what do you mean by 'intimidation and force'?"

"I mean what I say and I say what I mean," the Editor replied. He was holding a sheaf of papers in his right hand, not James's story but an assortment of yellow legal pages and typed sheets, all of them covered with black handwriting. James had not seen him reach for them; it was as if they had appeared in his hand. "Everything is text, Mr. Williamson: What makes you think you're any different? What makes you believe you're anything more than, say, a character in a story written by a balding Ph.D. candidate who should be working on his dissertation?"

For a reason he could not name, the sight of the various pages fluttering in the Editor's orange-brown hand filled James with a dread that reached from the pit of his stomach to the back of his throat. Absurd, he knew, but he felt the urge to leap out of his chair and make a grab for them. Instead, he attempted a grin and said, "This is — "

"This is the way of the world," the Editor said. With his left hand, he selected a letter opener from the bookcase to his left. It was a replica of a Roman short sword, a gladius. As he watched, the Editor placed the flock of pages onto his desk and, in a smooth, fluid arc, drove the letter opener through the center of them.

Pain exploded in James's chest, slamming him back in his chair. It felt as if a foot and a half of sharpened steel had been rammed through his sternum, impaling his heart. For a frozen moment, James could not speak, could not breathe, and then he was screaming. Never had he felt anything like this: the closest he had come was an inflamed appendix that had required emergency surgery, and what he had remembered as a mountain of suffering was dwarfed by this, a foothill beside the Everest of the hurt piercing him. Tears flooded his face; his nose streamed; he screamed. He could not think: he was only a body curled around the red agony that had replaced his heart.

"Do you feel that?" the Editor asked, leaning back in his chair, his eyes roaming from the letter opener jammed into his desk to James writhing in his chair back to the letter opener. "Of course you do. What

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I should ask is, Do you understand what is happening to you? Do you know who is doing this to you?" As James continued screaming, the Editor shouted, "Mr. Williamson, this will go much more smoothly and quickly if you will play your part. I ask you again, DO YOU KNOW WHO IS DOING THIS TO YOU?"

James stopped screaming. Through clenched teeth, he breathed, "You are."

"Me? Oh no, Mr. Williamson, no no no. I don't have anything to do with this. You are doing this to yourself."

"I am?"

"Why yes, of course, yes you are. It's been you who have been so stubborn, you who have refused to take heed of the cautions of shame and reason. You have brought us to this impasse; you have necessitated this drastic action."

Unable to think of a reply, James whimpered, a fresh wave of tears spilling down his cheeks.

"And if you are responsible for what is happening to you, then who do you think can stop it? Come on: you're dallying."

"Me," James gasped, "I can make it stop."

"Very good, although I daresay the answer was a bit obvious. Oh well, even the easy questions need answering. Yes, it's you, Mr. Williamson, James: it's you who can make this better or," the Editor paused, "worse. Do you want to know what you have to do?"

James nodded.

"Speak up, Mr. Williamson: I can't hear your head rattle."

"Yes," James managed.

"Good. There are a number of solutions to your dilemma. The first and most obvious is that you learn your place and accept it. Enough of this nonsense you've been passing off on your professor: from now on, you do what he wants you to. Embrace your role as a tyro. I realize that you may find yourself constitutionally incapable of abandoning your beloved métier, the fantastic. We can accommodate that: there is always a place for escapism. It must be escapism, however; it should fit nicely into that category. No round pegs in square holes. Whatever you decide to write, clean up your language; it's all there for you in Strunk and White.

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"Should neither of these options prove acceptable, for one reason or another, there are still more choices open to us. You can abandon fiction for nonfiction, for history, say. Feed the public's desire for trivia. Write a nice biography. No one takes the past seriously. There is also silence. You may choose to lay down the pen, to step back from the keyboard. If anyone asks why, you can appeal to the morality of silence; you'd be amazed at how successful we've been at selling that one.

"If none of these will do, then I'm afraid the decision will default back to us. And our choice, while effective, will be less than pleasant. Do you understand?"

"Yes," James whispered.

"I fear our little demonstration is going to have to continue for a bit longer. I understand, you see, that, once you have left my office and returned to the relative safety of your dorm room, you may find a way to convince yourself that none of this happened, that it was all a bad dream. We can't have that, Mr. Williamson, can we?"

"I'll remember," James said, "I'll remember I swear I'll remember I promise."

"Of course you do. Who wouldn't, in your situation? Such pledges aren't enough, I fear. There needs to be a memory sufficiently intense and unpleasant to give your oaths the requisite foundation."

"No," James pleaded, "no come on please."

"Don't worry," the Editor said, and pulled the letter opener out of the manuscript.

Instantly, the searing agony in James's chest was gone, so completely it might never have been there. He could feel his heart pounding, filling the space that had been a wound the moment before. Relief coursed through him; he could breathe again. His body, which had been contracted around the pain, relaxed all at once, as if he had been submerged in a warm bath. Eyes closed, he slumped back in his chair.

"Your attention, please, Mr. Williamson," the Editor said. "I want you to see this."

Although he would have been blissfully content to remain as he was for the next week or so, a jolt of fear surged up James's spine, opening his eyes and straightening him in his seat. The Editor, he saw, was holding the undersized gladius point down over the manuscript. The lower half of the

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sword was dripping a thick, richly red liquid that almost resembled blood. The manuscript on the desk was marked by the same viscous substance, which pooled at the spot where the letter opener had stabbed it. The Editor said, "All is text, Mr. Williamson. At this moment, we have the text. I want you to remember that."

"You have the text," James repeated, "yes."

"It's quite the opportunity you're being given, I hope you realize. Play your proper role, and you will number among those helping the cause of order. Who knows? Your influence could be profound. Perhaps, at some point, your involvement in our struggle might become more...direct. You are valuable to us, Mr. Williamson; you are worth so much more to us healthy and writing than otherwise. You've already demonstrated such spirit tonight, spirit that only needs to be given the proper outlet. It would be a terrible shame to see you go to waste. However — " the Editor raised the letter opener. James had sufficient time to see the bloody tip of the undersized sword poised over the bloody pages and know what was waiting to descend on him; he had sufficient time to look closely into the Editor's eyes and see that his pupils were the elongated pupils of a goat's eyes; he had sufficient time to think, It's a mask; he's wearing a mask and gloves. Then the letter opener drove into the manuscript with a thunk.

It was as if he had been stabbed in the neck, from his Adam's apple through to his spine. Gagging, he convulsed in his chair, flopping out of it and onto the floor. Dimly, he felt his knee, his head strike concrete. His hands clutched at his throat, trying to tear it free of what wasn't there. He heard a pop as the Editor wrenched the letter opener from the desk, and in the sudden absence of pain sucked in great whoops of air. Then another thunk, and his right leg felt as if it had been cut clean to the bone. James howled, grabbing at his thigh even as a second pop heralded the end of that hurt and a third thunk brought fireworks of agony bursting deep in his gut. His back; his side: he writhed as the Editor lanced him like a sadistic child plunging a pin into a hapless insect. The letter opener thunked through the manuscript with mechanical rhythm, and with each blow a new part of James's body screamed with abuse: his face; his foot; his eye; his groin; his knee. With each stab, he could feel himself tearing, as if he were so much paper yielding to the Editor's blows. His kidney flared nova-bright, and he was paper; he felt himself part before the blade the way a sheet of

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heavy-bond typing paper would. Thunk. He was paper. Thunk. He was paper. Thunk. Paper.

"I think that should do," the Editor said, and, for the final time, the pain went away. James lay on the floor, trembling, his voice screamed out. He had lost count of the number of times he had heard metal bite into wood: a dozen? twice that? more? The Editor loomed above. James looked up and saw his head floating overhead like a helium balloon. It did not seem to be attached to a body. "Get up," the head said, and James obeyed, climbing up on legs that wobbled like a comedian's. When he stood, he saw that the Editor's head had rejoined his body. The Editor's face, shirt, and coat were splattered with scarlet spray. The manuscript lay on the desk before him, ragged with holes, each one oozing blood. The letter opener lay to one side of it, washed in red to the hilt. "Here endeth the lesson," the Editor said pleasantly. "You understand what is required of you?"

James croaked, "Yes."

"Good. I could ask you to repeat everything I told you, but that panicked look is its own reward. I trust we won't see you again, Mr. Williamson."

"No," James said, "you won't."

"Glad to hear it. You can see yourself out. There is a door to the right as you leave this office: take it: it's a bit of a short cut. That's just between us, though."

"Yes," James said.

"And," the Editor held out his hand, and he was holding James's story, the way a hunter might hold the carcass of his latest kill, his bloody fingers smearing its white pages.

James stared at it.

"What would you like me to do with this?"

James shook his head.

"As I told you before, Mr. Williamson, I cannot hear your head rattle. You'll have to speak up."

"Do what you want," James finally said. "I don't care."

"Very well," the Editor said, and let the story fall flapping into the garbage can beside his desk. "That's good riddance to bad rubbish, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," James said.

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"Good. Now get out, boy, and don't let me see your face a second time."

Leaving the office on legs still shaking, James saw the door the Editor had mentioned to his right. He heaved it open, and stepped out into the quad in front of the Humanities building. Given the number of stairs he had descended, he should have felt shocked, he knew, but after the night's other marvels and terrors, this one seemed so much cheap parlor magic. A mob of students swelled past him on its way to town and the alcoholic pleasures of Pete's Corner Pub, their mingled shouts and laughter crowding the air. He watched them pass. The night air was cool on his skin, which continued to tingle. Above, a few stars competed in vain with a half-moon tilted to one side, like a silver cup pouring down radiance. As he stood there, feeling time expand, hearing the faint honks of distant car horns, James felt something loosen in his chest. He tried to arrest it, but was too tired to resist. The thing in his chest gave, and he was sitting on the ground, sobbing tears he had not believed he had left in him. Passersby sped up as they neared him. One girl with red hair and a long, fur-trimmed coat stopped to bend over and ask him if he was all right; he waved her on. Eventually, he rose and staggered to his dorm room on legs made numb from sitting for so long.

The next day, James went to his advisor and made the necessary arrangements to drop Creative Writing I. Asked for his reason, he explained that he was doing poorly in the class, on the verge of failing, and had decided that Creative Writing wasn't for him. When his advisor asked him what was for him, James answered, Economics. His advisor congratulated him on his sensible choice. Although James had not told his parents of his hope of majoring in Creative Writing, they were happy to learn of his decision to pursue Economics.

Midway through the following semester, however, during a lecture in Intro to Economics on the role of corporations in capitalism, James noticed his pen beginning to write sentences in the margins of his notebook. The sentences began, "Once upon a time," and, "To say the man was fat," and, "Everything about this man came to a point." Realizing what he was doing, he scribbled out the sentences frantically, his heart knocking. But after a day passed with no reprisals — a day James spent ceaselessly glancing from side to side, starting at loud noises, feeling

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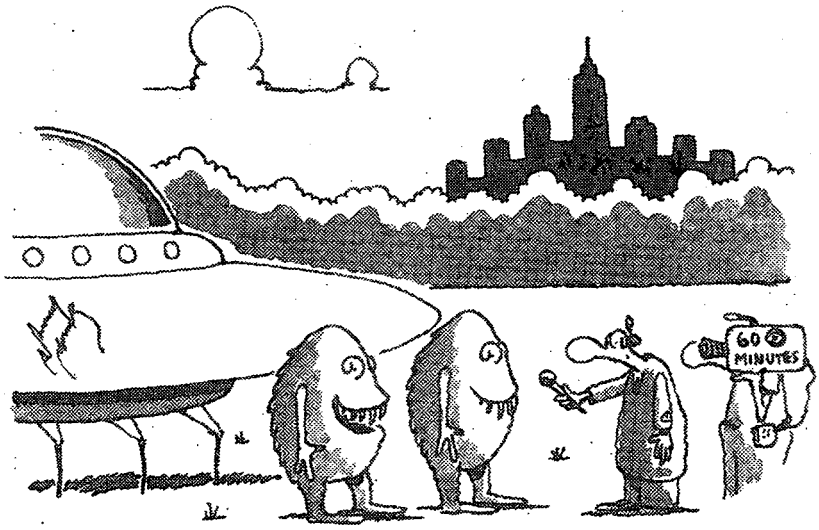
the skin between his shoulder blades tingle as if someone were targeting a rifle on it — and then another, and finally a third, he couldn't help himself: he wrote a short short story on the inside back page of his Biology notebook while he should have been learning cell mitosis. It was followed by a longer piece in the same notebook two classes later, and another short short story in his Art History notebook that emerged during an extended slide lecture on eighteenth-century English landscape painters. He described the inhabitants of the tutoring center at great length, inventing weaknesses for them, liabilities. All was text, the Editor had said, what was written wove the world. Exactly how it did so James was unsure. Did Sean feel his suit of skin loosen ever so slightly? Did Raymond notice more and more people looking at him, their expressions confused, as if they had momentarily glimpsed something terrible? Did the Editor notice that the dimensions of his office seemed to be changing, that it appeared to be shrinking around him? Impossible to say; though he suspected that, eventually, somehow, his words would have to find print.

He wrote every day, quickly, hunched over his desk, one eye open to everyone and everything around him. ☙

—For Fiona



"Look, Zabb, they even come with cooking instructions."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Write What You Sell

"Bellevue may be the only municipal hospital in the country to have a literary review.... The review was founded two years ago by Dr. Ofri and Dr. Martin Blaser... '[to] touch upon relationships to the human body, illness, health and healing....'"

— "A Literary Review at Bellevue? Believe It!," Dinitia Smith, *The New York Times*, October 2, 2002

I HAD worked at Hammock Industries for twenty-seven years now, and enjoyed mostly every minute of my tenure there. From my earliest days in the stockroom, filling orders for our loyal customers, to my ascent through the ranks of management to my present position, Assistant Vice-President for Purchasing, my hours of employment had been filled mainly with excitement and satisfaction. Oh, I suspect most people would have found the engineering and selling of sump pumps to be a boring job. But not me! I knew that Hammock Industries created a solid, reliable product which people — often quite desperate people — really needed. If you can envision the frantic alarm of a home-owner or businessman who finds his basement or warehouse flooded, and his immediate relief when he hears the powerful sucking sound of a Hammock Flowmaster 8000 surging into action, then you can picture some of the daily spiritual rewards I received.

And the business was always changing. Hammock Industries hardly stood still; we simply couldn't afford to, in the face of competition from such deadly rivals as Pettygrove Products and Liquid Removal Systems. We made a point of introducing new technologies on a regular basis. I can readily recall such thrilling highlights as the substitution of silicone gaskets in place of rubber ones across all

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lines, and the creation of the digital control panel on the MegaSiphon XPR.

I had no complaints about my salary or benefits. (After my first decade with Hammock Industries, I made enough so that Janey had been able to stay home with the youngest two kids.) My co-workers were a bright and funny group of people, especially Jim Blick down in Accounting (you should have seen the crazy getup he wore to the summer company cookout). And the reserved parking space just steps away from the front door was a really sweet perk (although I had been contemplating parking a little farther away, just to burn off a few extra calories and hopefully reduce the ol' spare tire inflated by the tasty fare at the H.I. cafeteria).

So why wasn't I the happiest man in Squaw Blanket, Idaho?

One reason only. This latest crazy plan dropped on my shoulders by the company's owner, Roger Hammock III.

And today was the day I had to report some results to my boss.

Results which I just didn't have a lot of faith in.

Very nervously, carrying a portfolio, I entered the office of "RH3." (That's what we joshingly called him behind his back.) There he sat, a ginger-haired, ruddy-faced fellow a decade or so younger than me. His blue suit came not from Wal-Mart, like those of myself and the other managers, but from some fancy store all the way over in Lincoln, Nebraska. RH3 had been educated out East, and he had picked up and retained some wild and weird ways that frequently disconcerted the average resident of Squaw Blanket. Legend had it that he had contemplated becoming some kind of artist or writer during his undergraduate years. But that plan had been scotched when he had to rush home to take over the business after the tragedy involving his father, when the older man had been buried under tons of mud while inspecting the workings of a balky Squeeze-Genie Plus at the bottom of a faultily shored ditch.

This new brainstorm was typical of the son's outlandish notions.

On the wall behind my boss hung portraits of his father and grandfather. I had started when RH2 had been at the helm, and RH1 had even still been alive, stopping in at the office once a month, just to shake his cane at whatever new-model pump baffled him. "What! No horsehair bushings! How does the blamed thing function!?!" We had all had a big

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chuckle at the old man's stodgy mannerisms, but now I was beginning to sympathize with RH1's frustration with the unstoppable march of progress.

RH3 ceased looking at some correspondence and spoke heartily but commandingly to me. "Mewborn, take a seat!"

I sat down tentatively.

"I'm sure you've finally got a full mockup of the new project there with you. Spread it out! Let's have a look!"

Reluctantly, I opened my portfolio and took out a substantial mass of printout, spiral-bound. I set the mockup down on the desk.

RH3's eyes gleamed. "Mewborn, this is the moment I've been waiting for. At last, Hammock Industries is going to publish its own literary review!"

"Sir, you might wish to temper your enthusiasm until you scan the tentative table of contents and some of the, erm, texts. As you requested, I've tried to gather together some, ah, 'scintillating Joan-Didion-style essays and transgressive Kathy-Ackerish fiction,' not to mention some examples of 'New Wave Fabulism.' But I fear that the appropriate resources for this project just aren't available here at H.I. You've required me to produce something for which we have no pool of ready talent."

RH3 sat back disgustedly in his big chair. "Nonsense! There's got to be enough talent here to launch a simple literary review! My God, if they can do it at Bellevue with a bunch of screwballs, surely we can do it here, with our superior employees!"

Bellevue. How I hated that name! Ever since Mrs. RH3 had spent a few hush-hush months there on the advice of her local doctor and RH3 himself had learned of that hospital's foray into magazine publishing, my life had been fraught with queer new responsibilites and alien concepts.

Thumbing the first sheet of printout, done on heavier stock, RH3 studied it for a moment before speaking. "I can't say I'm wild about this cover. It looks just like one of our brochures!"

I had to admit that the cover illustration was rather drab. The colophon (a term I had recently learned) consisted of hundred-year-old engravings of our very first pump, the Mechanical Mule Bellows, flanking the title: *The Hammock Industries Inspirer*. The image I had chosen to grace the rest of the cover was a photograph supplied by Connie Riedesel down in Packing:

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a shot of her young son Wesley riding a state-of-the-art Bilgebuster AAA as if it were a hobbyhorse.

"Well, I honestly thought, sir, that getting an image of our product up front was important. After all, this, ah, magazine is intended to publicize our business, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, damn it! But it's also meant to be an exploration of creativity and the human spirit! We're striving for a high-class, artistic outlet that showcases the passion and dreams of our workers. Not tradeshow propaganda!"

"Well, perhaps the cover *could* use a redesign. But I'm sure the actual contents will come closer to your vision, sir."

"So long as you took your guidance from those copies of *The Bellevue Review* I gave you, I'm sure it will. You also studied those issues of *Conjunctions*, *Glimmer Train*, *McSweeney's*, *Crank!*, and the *Mississippi Review*, didn't you?"

"Of course, sir."

"Very good. Now, let's have a look inside." RH3 jumped past the table of contents and began to read the first entry. His rapidly furrowing brow signaled no good reaction, and I sought to forestall any chastisement.

"'The World Sucks Like a Sump Pump, and Then You Die.' Contributed by Ed Trippet's daughter, Joan, sir. She was recently suspended from Westlake High for smoking in the girls' lavatory, so I thought she'd do nicely for our 'transgressive' author."

"This, this—this is mere whining and annoying teenager slang, Mewborn! I can't imagine an audience used to William Vollmann's dashing escapades getting excited over this! What else do you have here?"

"Turn to page thirty-one, sir. I think you'll be impressed."

RH3 read only a few paragraphs before thwacking the mockup with the back of his hand. "What do you call this farrago, Mewborn? I'm referring to 'It Never Ends,' by one Shirley Vester."

"Ah, the aforementioned 'new wave fabulism,' sir?"

"New wave fabulism, my ass! This is nothing but a group of recognizable characters from a popular sitcom plunked down in Disney World discussing the reputed inefficiencies of our Quality Control department!"

I grabbed frantically for some buzz words I had picked up in my studies. "I thought Shirley conveyed the, um, 'plastic hyper-reality' of Disney World very boldly."

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Now RH3 scanned the table of contents, rattling off titles dismissively. "'Hoses and Roses.' 'The Donkey Engines of my Heart.' 'Born to Clean Filters.' 'Pimps of the Plains and their Ida-ho's.' 'Elk Lodge Hell.' This is all amateur trash, unfitting of any real literary review! Why, I doubt that even the editors of a *genre* magazine would publish such drivel!"

I hung my head and murmured, "I did my best, sir, with the talent available."

RH3 leaned forward and fixed me with a hard glare. "Not a sufficient excuse, Mewborn. A real editor is expected to motivate his contributors to exceed their perceived limitations. Do you even have any conception of what a *story* is? What constitutes authentic Wolfean-Thompsonian New Journalism? Your selections here are half-baked water-cooler ramblings, unacceptable in any literary review worthy of the name! As for approaching the greatness of true literature — literature that would reflect the entire range of human emotions and aspirations as contained within the walls of Hammock Industries, both Plants One and Two — they are an absolute farce!"

I was silent for a whole minute. "Well, Jim Blick has some really funny stories from his weekends in the National Guard — "

RH3 actually growled then. He tossed the mockup I had worked so hard on into his trash can.

"Mewborn! I'm sending you to school!"

"To — to school, sir?"

"You heard me! You're heading out East, to Wesleyan or Sarah Lawrence or Bennington or Swarthmore, whichever one of those editor-producing institutions will have you. You'll take an intensive one-year course, learning all there is to know about fiction and essays and magazines. Or at least enough for our purposes. And when you get back here, you're going to produce a publication that will make the *Paris Review* look like *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet!*"

My head was spinning, and I had no idea of who all those colleges and magazines were, or what the next year of my life was going to be like, or what Janey would have to say about all this. In my desperation, I ought to cling to the one bastion of my life.

"Ah, sir, perhaps you could pick a university located in some swampland, at least? Then in my spare time perhaps I could convince the locals to test the efficiency of our

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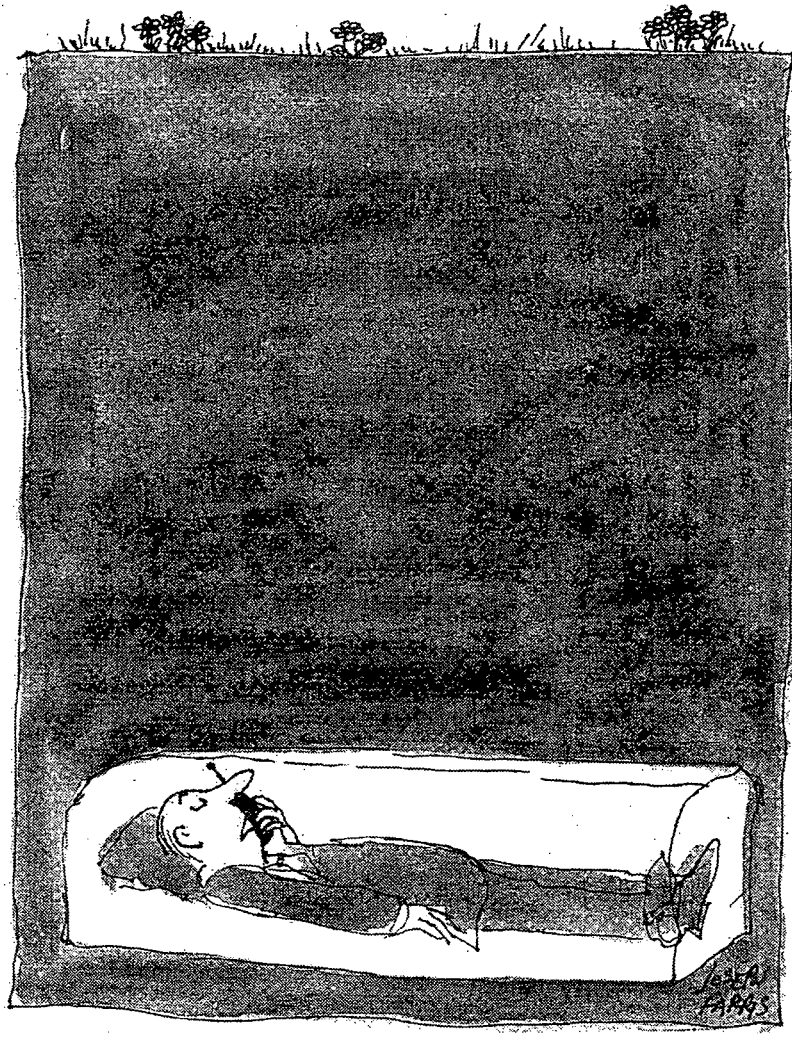
newest models, such as the Black Hole Cyberpump...."

RH3 looked irritated for a moment, then brightened. "Capital idea, Mewborn! Let's see, now. I believe the Charles River in Cambridge has been known to flood its banks from time to time — "



"I'm six feet under. Where are you?"

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Ben Rosenbaum lives in Switzerland with his wife and daughter. His short fiction has appeared in magazines such as Infinite Matrix, Quarterly West, Strange Horizons, *and* Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. *His two previous contributions to our pages—"The Ant King" (July 2001) and "Droplet" (July 2002)—raised a few eyebrows when they first appeared. His new story is a short surreal piece that is likely to do the same.*

Red Leather Tassels

By Benjamin Rosenbaum

ONCE THERE WAS A CAPTAIN of industry who lost his shoes. They were fine brown shoes, with red leather tassels. The captain of industry, whose name was George, sat in a board meeting in his socks. Everyone was upset about the stock market crash and they all had opinions, but George could not pay any attention to them at all because he was so worried about his shoes. So he said, "Excuse me," and got up from his soft leather chair, and even though he was the most important of them all, they were arguing so hard that no one noticed when he left the room.

He went onto the roof because he thought his shoes might be there, and because he had a thing about roofs. He walked carefully over the gravel, among the ventilator fans, which looked like giant steel mushrooms with spinning heads. He also stopped to pick up the gravel with his toes, which he could do in his socks because he was a talented man. He could even throw the gravel off the roof into the parking lot with his toes.

Then a flock of pigeons came and took ahold of his suit in their beaks and lifted him into the air.

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At first George fought with the birds and tried to kick them, but that did no good.

Soon they were high over Lake Geneva.

Looking down, George saw a beautiful woman with no shirt on sunning herself on the deck of a sailboat. He fell in love. He fell in love with her saucy French lips; with her air of wise amusement; with her breasts like extra-large scoops of insouciant almond ice cream melting in the breeze. He called to her, but she was too far below. So he took out his cell phone and dropped it into the crow's nest of the sailboat. His aim was good; he was a talented man.

Then he sang to the birds, mainly Cole Porter songs, because falling in love put him in a nostalgic mood. He sang "Anything Goes." He sang "It's Too Darn Hot." He sang "I Get a Kick Out of You." He also sang "The Logical Song" by Supertramp.

The birds liked it.

In the crow's nest of the sailboat, the cell phone rang. The woman, whose name was Francesca, climbed up into the crow's nest to answer it. It was George's wife.

"Honey," said George's wife in a rush, "you forgot your shoes this morning."

"I am not Honey," said Francesca, "I am Francesca."

"Oh!" said George's wife, and turned red. She dropped the shoes onto the Navajo rug. There was a woodpecker hammering outside her window.

The woodpecker was a thousand years old. He had stayed alive all this time because, when he was young, he had built his nest in the hair of a famous Hindu ascetic who was standing very still. The ascetic had taught the woodpecker how to breathe properly, how to conserve his semen, and how to chew his food very carefully, so that he would not age. The woodpecker had built up a great deal of wisdom and spiritual merit in his thousand years. However, the woodpecker was now sick of this crap. He just wanted to get laid.

When the woodpecker saw George's wife looking distraught, staring at the phone in her hand and then staring at the shoes with the red leather tassels on the Navajo rug, he became aroused, because he liked distraught women.

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He flew in through the window and convinced George's wife to make love to him. She felt depressed and listless and not at all like having sex. However, she felt very angry at George for leaving his cell phone with a woman named Francesca; and she loved cartoons. So sex with a woodpecker might be just the thing.

She took off her house dress, as the woodpecker instructed, and, naked except for her white bunny slippers, leaned her head and elbows on the fuzzy taupe sofa.

The woodpecker mounted George's wife and began to copulate with her.

Oh! — thought the woodpecker — to at last be making love! Pfui on the silence that allows the discursive ego to fall away! Pfui on the enlightenment that dissolves the illusory distinction between the self and the universal background of bliss! Let me at your cloaca, baby! Yes! Uh! Uh!

George's wife felt a pleasant, feathery tickling.

The woodpecker felt a great heat, a great trembling, building — and then it rushed through him in a wave and, without meaning to, he slammed his beak three times against the woman's tailbone —

BANG BANG BANG

"Ouch!" cried George's wife. "Stop it! Don't do that again!"

"Sorry, sorry," said the woodpecker, continuing to copulate with her. The trembling came again. He crossed his eyes. He held his breath. He felt the wave shooting through him and he leaned forward, trying to keep control — but all the same, his beak came down in the small of the woman's back —

BANG BANG BANG

"OUCH!" cried George's wife, and she smacked the woodpecker off her back with one hand, so that he flew onto the kitchen table, knocking over the milk and getting quince jelly in his feathers (she had been a little depressed before the phone call anyway and had not yet cleared the breakfast dishes).

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"Just who do you think you are?" yelled George's wife. She rubbed her back and licked the blood off her fingers. She felt angry and powerful, and she imagined that she could smack Francesca off the polar bear rug on which she was undoubtedly sitting, wearing a teddy and garters and things, so that Francesca would tumble out the window of her penthouse apartment and into the street below.

"I'm terribly sorry," said the woodpecker, and he shook his feathers, spraying jelly on the Navajo rug.

"What the heck were you thinking?"

The woodpecker looked her in the eye. "Ma'am," he said, "I am a woodpecker."

They watched a rivulet of spilled milk run along the baseboard of the dining room until it reached the cedar bookshelf.

"If you like, I'll go," the woodpecker said.

Without a word, George's wife went to her son's room (the son was at boarding school) and returned with a miniature foam rubber football. With the bread knife, she made an incision in the football, and then she stuck it on the woodpecker's beak. Then she returned to her position at the couch.

The woodpecker wondered: what would be appropriate at this juncture? The foam rubber football on his beak made him feel ridiculous, despite all of his spiritual merit. By tilting his head, he could see past the large blob of out-of-focus blue, to the woman's vast, attractive buttocks like two large summer moons against a fuzzy taupe sky.

Trying to preserve a modicum of dignity, he fluttered over to the woman and began to copulate with her again.

The woman was starting to enjoy the sex. It felt like the fluttering of a feather duster against her bottom, an insistent, passionate feather duster. Sometimes she could feel a hard little nobbin that might be the tiny penis of the woodpecker. Compared to her woodpecker lover she felt gigantic, powerful, an Amazon Queen.

I will control myself this time, the woodpecker thought. I will not humiliate myself again by rapping this lovely creature as if she were a tree full of worms! A large white tree, like a birch, with incredibly smooth, silken bark, and luscious plump worms burrowing beneath its surface, a goddess tree with holy worms, singing, singing, calling —

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— the woodpecker launched himself into the air, flapped once, and landed against the woman's neck, slamming his beak against her —

FOP FOP FOP

The woman giggled.

The woodpecker slid back down and ejaculated into the hole his beak had made near the base of the woman's spine.

The thousand years he owed entropy pounced on him in that moment, and he turned to dust.

The spiritual merit of the woodpecker surged up the woman's spine. Her skin glowed red. She could hear nothing but her own breathing, which was a roar like a freight train passing — a roar like the ocean — a roar like a trillion lions, if every atom of the Earth became a lion, a huge globe of lions roaring and clawing at each other in the depths of space.

The miniature foam rubber football, now dusty, rolled from her back onto the Navajo rug.

The woman stood up. She kicked off her bunny slippers. Now she was naked.

She slipped her feet into George's shoes, the ones with the red leather tassels.

She went into the backyard.

She took a deep breath full of her years with George: fabric softener, diapers, midnight snacks before the cold fridge, stupid show tunes floating down from the roof, and the embrace of her son's small arms when he was three.

She bent her legs. Her knees no longer creaked.

She jumped into the wide suburban sky.

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Earlier in this issue Scott Bradfield gave us a lighthearted look at life on the internet. M. Rickert examines the darker side of that coin with her latest update on classical Greek myths. "Chambered Fruit" isn't exactly what you'd call upbeat or lighthearted, but it is powerful and all too timely.

The Chambered Fruit

By M. Rickert

STONES. ROOTS. CHIPS LIKE bones. The moldering scent of dry leaves and dirt, the odd aroma of mint. What grew here before it fell to neglect and misuse? I remember this past spring's tulips and daffodils, sprouted amongst the weeds, picked and discarded without discrimination. I was so distracted by my dead daughter that I rarely noticed the living. I take a deep breath. Mint thyme. It should have survived the neglect, perhaps did, but now has fallen victim to my passionate weeding, as so much of more significance has fallen victim before it. I pick up a small brown bulb and set it, point up, in the hole, cover it with dirt. Geese fly overhead. I shade my eyes to watch them pass, and then cannot avoid surveying the property.

Near the old barn are piles of wood and brick meant to further its renovation. Leaves and broken branches litter the stacks. The wood looks slightly warped, weathered by the seasons it's gone untended. The yard is bristly with dried weeds and leaves. The house has suffered the worst. Surely, instead of planting bulbs I should be calling a contractor. It can't

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be good, the way it looks like it's begun to sink into the earth or how the roof litters shingles that spear into the ground around it. But who should I call? How far do I have to search to find someone who doesn't know our story?

I think of it like the nursery rhyme. Inside the old farmhouse with the sagging porch, through the large sunny kitchen, past the living room with the wood-burning stove, up the creaking stairs and down the hall lined with braided rugs, past the bathroom with the round window and claw-footed tub, past the yellow and white bedroom we called the guest room, past her room (where the door is shut) to our bedroom — my bedroom now — there is, on the bedside table, a picture of the three of us. It's from her last birthday. Twelve candles on the cake. She is bent to blow them out, her face in pretty profile. Her dark hair brushes against the smooth skin of her puffed cheek; her eye, bright with happiness, dark-lashed beneath its perfectly arched brow. Jack and I stand behind her. Both of us are blurry, the result of Jack having set up the camera for automatic timer, his running to be in the shot, me moving to make room for him. He looks like her, only handsome, and I look like, well, someone passing by who got in the picture by mistake, a blur of long untidy hair, an oversized shirt, baggy slacks. The camera captures and holds their smiles forever, locked in innocence and joy, and my smile, strained, my focus somewhere past the borders of the picture, as if I see, in the shadows, what is coming.

When I think of everything that happened, from the beginning, I look for clues. In a way, there are so many it baffles strangers that we couldn't see them. But to understand this, and really, I'm beyond expecting anyone else to understand this, but for my own understanding, I have to remember that to be human is a dangerous state. That said, Jack's nature is not profoundly careless, and I am not, really, in spite of everything you might have read or concluded, criminally naïve. Though of course I accept, even as I rebel against its horrible truth, that a great deal of the fault was ours. Sometimes I think more ours than his. When I look for clues to the dangerous parents we'd become I have to accept the combustible combination that occurred, just once, when Jack was careless and I was naïve and that's all it took. We lost her.

You may be familiar with my old work. Folk scenes, sort of like Grandma Moses except, frankly, hers are better. Maybe the difference is

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that hers were created from real memories and mine were made from longing. No one I know has ever ridden in a horse-drawn sleigh, with or without bells. We did not hang Christmas wreaths on all the doors and from the street lamps lit with candles. We did not send the children to skate at the neighborhood pond (which didn't exist, the closest thing being the town dump) or burn leaves and grow pumpkins (well, the Hadleys grew pumpkins but their farmhouse was an old trailer so it didn't really fit the picture). We did garden, but our gardens did not all blossom into perfect flower at the same moment on the same day, the women standing in aprons, talking over the fence. The sun shone but it didn't shine the way I painted it, a great ball of light with spears of brightness around it.

These are the paintings I made. Little folk scenes that were actually quite popular, not in town, of course, but in other places where people imagined the world I painted existed. I made a decent living at it. Even now, when all I paint are dark and frightening scenes of abduction and despair that I show no one (who would come anyway, even old friends keep their distance now) I live off the royalties. My paintings are on calendars, Christmas cards, coasters, T-shirts. In the first days of horror, when the news coverage was so heavy, I thought someone would certainly point out that I (the neglectful mother of the dead girl) was also the painter, C. R. Rite, but as far as I know the connection was never made and my income has not suffered for my neglect.

Jack still represents my work, which also makes it strange that no one ever made the connection. Maybe people assumed we were actually farmers, though the locals certainly knew that wasn't true. Maybe the media was just too busy telling the grisly details of our story to focus any attention on the boring issue of our finances. Certainly that matter isn't very titillating. What people seemed to want to hear was how our daughter died, an endless nightmare from which I can't ever wake, that strangers actually watch and read as some form of entertainment.

I accept my fault in this, and I know it's large. I live every day with the Greek proportions of our story. In the classic nature I had a fault, a small area, like Achilles's heel, that left me vulnerable.

But not evil. As Jack likes to point out, we didn't do that to her and we would have stopped it from happening if we knew how.

The unforgivable thing, everyone agrees, is that we didn't see it. How

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evil do you have to be? We did not keep our daughter safe and she's dead because of that. Isn't that evil enough?

When we moved here, Steff was eight. She didn't know that we were really country people, having lived her whole life in the city. At first she spent all her time in her room with her books and her dolls but eventually, during that giddy first hot summer when I walked about in my slip (when the construction crew wasn't working on the barn) eating raspberries off the bushes and planting sunflower seeds, and hollyhocks (though it was too late and they wouldn't bloom), she joined me, staying close, afraid of all the space, the strangeness of sky. Eventually, she came to love it too and brought blankets into the yard for picnics, both real and imagined, and paper to color, which, in true Buddha-child fashion she left to blow about the yard when she was finished. When one of these pictures blew across my path, a scene of a girl picking flowers, a shimmering angel behind her, I memorized it and then let it blow away, thinking it would be a gift for somebody unlucky enough not to have a child who drew pictures of that other world which children are so close to.

IN THE CITY, Steffie had attended a small private school with a philosophy that sheltered children from the things in our world that make them grow up so fast. The influence of media was discouraged and, contrary to national trend, computer use was considered neither necessary nor particularly beneficial to children. At eight, Steffie still played with dolls, and believed in, if not magic, at least a magicalness to the world; a condition that caused strangers to look at her askance and try to measure her IQ but for which I took great pride. In her school they learned the mythic stories, needlework, and dance. Friends of mine with children in public or other private schools talked of the homework stress and the busyness of their lives, transporting kids from practice to practice. When I visited these friends their children did not play the piano, or happily kick soccer balls in the yard. In spite of all those lessons, or, I suspected, because of them, these children sat listless and bleary-eyed in front of the television or wandered about the house, restless and bored, often resorting to eating, while Steffie played with dolls or spoons, whatever was available. I feel

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that our society has forgotten the importance of play, the simple beginnings of a creative mind. The value of that. Not that anyone is interested in parental guidance from me now.

At any rate, Steffie got off the bus, that first day, in tears. Several of the children would not sit with her because, they said, we were a bunch of hippies who ran around the yard in our underthings. When Steffie told me this I cried right along with her. I'd made a life out of forgetting the world. I found its reminders sharp and disturbing.

Eventually, she adjusted and I did too. I wore clothes in the yard, though I was baffled how anyone knew I'd ever done differently. Steff put away her dolls and proudly carried her heavy backpack filled with books and maps and serious questions about the real world, completely neglecting anything about the spiritual. Incredibly (to me) she liked it. A lot. She loved the candy they were rewarded with, the movies they watched, the nutrition papers provided by the meat board. "I like it because it's normal," she said and I realized that she knew we were not.

The years passed. I had the barn converted to an art studio and planned to further the renovation so that I could turn it into a sort of community art center for teenagers. I imagined Saturday mornings teaching painting, others teaching things like weaving, or, when Steffie began to take an interest in it, even dance. I think part of the motivation for this plan was the idea of filling the place with teenagers and helping Steffie's social life, which still seemed, though she never complained, strangely quiet for a child her age.

So, when Jack bought the computer, I thought it was a good idea. He said he needed it for the business and Steffie had been complaining for some time that she "needed" one too. He brought home the computer and I didn't argue. After all, he and Steff were the ones dealing with the notorious "real" world and I was the one who got to spend all morning painting happy pictures and the rest of the day gardening, or baking cookies, or reading a good book. Who in the world lived a life like mine?

When the computer was set up and ready to use in his office Jack called me to come look. I looked into the brightly colored screen and felt numbed by it. Steff, however, was thrilled. Soon the two of them were talking a strange language I didn't understand. I drifted off into private thoughts, mentally working on paintings, scenes from a time before the world was enchanted by screens.

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* * *

About three months before (oh God, I still cannot write these words without trembling) her last birthday, Jack began campaigning that we get Steff her own computer. I didn't like the idea but I couldn't say why, though I held my ground until one Saturday when I drove into town to the post office and saw a group of girls who looked to be Steffie's age, and who I thought I recognized from classroom functions, sitting at the picnic table outside the ice cream place. A few of the girls caught me staring and were whispering behind open hands. I turned away. Had I done this to her? Was it my strangeness that made her unpopular? I went home and told Jack to go ahead and buy the thing. We gave it to her for her twelfth birthday, that's when we took the picture, the one I still have on the bedside table.

Steff was thrilled. She hugged us both and gave us kisses and thanked us so much that I began to believe we had done the right thing. I was baffled how this silent box was going to make her life better but after seeing those girls together, I was ready to try anything.

They put the computer in her room. At night, after dinner, they each went off for hours, clicking and staring at their separate screens. I lit candles and sat, with the cat in my lap, reading. I guess I had some vague ideas about homework, and I'd heard that there were ways to view great paintings from distant museums on the computer. I assumed she was doing things like that. I thought she should be doing more interacting with the world. I thought this as I sat reading, with the cat on my lap, and tried to believe that one solitude is the same as any other.

As though she'd been given the magic elixir for a social life, she began talking about various friends. Eventually one name came up more and more frequently. Celia read the same books Steffie did and liked to draw and dance. When Celia asked Steff to sleep over I was thrilled until I found out Stephani---e had never actually met the girl but only "talked" to her on the computer.

Of course I said this would not happen. She could be anyone; why, Celia might not even be a girl, I said. No, she could not sleep over at this stranger's house, who, coincidentally lived only twenty-four miles away.

Steff burst into tears at the dinner table, threw her napkin on the plate. "You don't want me to be normal," she said, "you want me to be just

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like you and I'm not!" Then she ran out of the kitchen, up the stairs to her bedroom where she actually slammed the door, all of this perhaps not unusual behavior for an almost teenager but completely new for Steff.

Jack looked at me accusingly.

"You can't expect me to let her go off to some stranger's house. We don't even know the family."

"Whose family do we know?"

I understood his point. I had sheltered us, all of us, with my sheltered ways.

"When it comes down to it, if she went anywhere in town, we wouldn't know those people either."

"It's not the same thing. People have reputations." As soon as I saw the look on Jack's face, I realized that our reputation was probably more extensive than I knew. If not for me, they would be having a normal life. I was the odd one. It was all my fault.

"What if I speak to the girl's parents, would that make you more comfortable?"

For a moment, I considered that we invite the girl's family over, we could have a barbecue, but the thought of having to spend a whole evening entertaining anyone horrified me. When it comes right down to it, my daughter died because of my reluctance to entertain. How ridiculous and horrifying. Instead, I agreed that she could go if Jack talked to Celia's parents first.

We went up to her room together. We knocked and entered. I expected to find her lying across the bed, my posture of teenage despair, but instead, she was sitting at the desk, staring into the computer.

"We've decided you can go, but we want to speak to her parents first."

She turned and grinned, bathed in computer glow, all the color gone from her pretty face and replaced with green.

"Is that Celia now?" Jack asked.

She nodded.

"Ask her for her number."

She began typing. I turned and walked away. What was I so creeped out about? This was the new world. My daughter and my husband were a part of it, as was I, even if with reluctance.

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Jack spoke to Celia's father that night. It turned out they had a lot in common too. He was an insurance salesman. His wife, however, was very different from me, a lawyer out of town until Friday night. Jack covered the mouthpiece. "He wants to pick Steff up around 4:30 on Friday. He's going to be passing through town. They'll pick Celia up at her dance class, and Sarah will get home from D.C. about 5:30. He's spoken to her and she's happy to have Stephanie over. What do you think?"

"How does he sound?"

"He sounds a lot like me."

Steff was standing in the kitchen doorway watching. I wasn't used to her squinty-eyed appraisal, as if suddenly there was something suspicious about me.

"Okay," I said.

Steff grinned. Jack took his hands off the mouthpiece. "That'll work out fine," he said in a boisterous voice. They really both looked so thrilled. Had I done this to them? Kept them so sheltered that Stephanie's going to sleep over at a friend's house on a Friday night, an absolutely normal occurrence for any girl Stephanie's age, was such an enormous event?

Was this all my fault?

HE WAS RIGHT on time. It was a beautiful spring day, unseasonably warm. I found him immediately affable, friendly, grinning dimples. I thought he looked younger than Jack or me, though in reality he was a year older. I guess people without consciences don't wrinkle like the rest of us. I opened the door and we shook hands. He had a firm handshake, a bit sweaty, but it was a warm day. Jack came out and the two of them got to talking immediately. I slipped away to get Steff. I went to her bedroom. Her backpack was packed, the sleeping bag rolled next to it, but she was not in the room. I walked over to the window and saw her in the garden, picking flowers. I opened the window. She looked up and waved, the flowers in her hand arcing the sky. I waved, pointed to his car. She nodded and ran toward the house. I brought the ridiculously heavy backpack and sleeping bag downstairs. When I got to the kitchen, she was standing there, her cheeks flushed, holding the bouquet of daffodils and tulips while Jack and Celia's father talked. I helped her wrap the stems in wet

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paper towel and aluminum foil. "This is a very nice idea," I whispered to her at the sink.

She smiled and shrugged. "Celia said her mom likes flowers too."

What was it about that that set off a little warning buzzer in my head? All these coincidences. I shook it back; after all, isn't that how friendships are made, by common interests? We turned and the fathers stopped talking. Celia's father grinned at Steff. Once more the alarm sounded but he bent down, picked up the pack, and said something like, What do kids put in these things, Celia's is always so heavy too. They walked to the door. I wanted to hug Stephanie but it seemed silly and probably would be embarrassing to her, and, after all, hadn't I already embarrassed her enough? The screen door banged shut. I stood in the kitchen and listened to the cheerful voices, the car doors slam, the engine, the sound of the gravel as they drove away. Too late, I ran out to wave good-bye. I have no idea if Steffie saw me or not.

Jack wrapped his arms around my waist, nuzzled my neck. "The garden? Kitchen? Name your place, baby."

"I should have told her to call when she gets there."

"Honey, she'll be back tomorrow."

"Let's call her, just to make sure she's comfortable."

"Chloe — "

"After we call her, the garden."

There was a sudden change in the weather. The temperature dropped thirty degrees. We closed windows and doors and put on sweaters and jeans. It began to rain about 5:30 and it just kept raining. We called at six, seven, eight. No one answered. It began to hail.

"Something's wrong," I said.

"They probably just went to a movie."

We called at nine. It rang and rang.

"I'm going there."

"What? Are you kidding? Do you have any idea how embarrassing that would be for her?"

"Well, where are they, Jack?"

"They went to a movie, or the mall, or out for pizza. Not everyone lives like us."

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Ten. Still no answer.

I put on my coat.

"Where are you going?"

"Give me the directions."

"You can't be serious."

"Where are the directions?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"Jack!"

"I don't have any directions."

"What do you mean? How are we supposed to pick her up?"

"Turns out he's coming back this way tomorrow. He's going to drop her off."

Lightning split the sky and thunder shook the house. "Do you even have an address?"

"I'm sure everything's all right," he said, but he said it softly and I could hear the fear in his voice.

We called at 10:20, 10:30, 10:41, 10:50, 10:54. At last, at 10:59, a man's voice.

"Hello, this is Steffie's mother, is this — " I don't even know his name " — is this Celia's dad?"

"I just picked up the phone, lady, ain't no one here."

"What do you mean? Who are you? Where is everyone?"

"This is just a phone booth, okay?"

I drop the phone. I run to the bathroom. In the distance I hear Jack's voice, he says the number and then he says, "Oh my God," and I don't hear the rest, over the sound of my retching.

Police sirens blood red. Blue uniforms and serious faces. Lights blaze. Pencils scratch across white pads. Jack wipes his hand through his hair, over and over again. Dry taste in my mouth. The smell of vomit. The questions. The descriptions. Fingerprint powder. I take them to her bedroom. Strange hands paw her things. Her diary. Someone turns her computer on. "Do you know her password?" I shake my head. "Well," says the man, reading her diary, "it appears she really believed there was a Celia." What? Of course she did, can I see that? "Sorry, ma'am, it's evidence." Downstairs. More uniforms and raincoats. Police banter about

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the weather. Blazing lights. The telephone rings. Sudden silence. I run to answer it. "Hello." It's Mrs. Bialo, my neighbor; she says, is everything all right? No, it's not. I hang up the phone. The activity resumes. Suddenly I see a light like the tiny flicker of a hundred fireflies hovering close to me and I hear her voice, Mom? I fall to my knees sobbing. Jack rushes over and holds me like I'm breakable. There is a temporary and slight change in the activity around us but then it continues as before and goes on like this for hours. In early morning there is a freak snowfall. We start getting calls from newspapers and magazines. A TV truck parks at the end of our drive. My neighbor, Mrs. Bialo, shows up with banana bread and starts making coffee. I stand on the porch and watch the snow salting down. The red tulips droop wounded against the icy white. The daffodils bow their silent bells. I listen to the sound of falling snow. I haven't told anyone what I know. What would be the point? Who would believe me? But I know. She's dead. She's dead. She's gone.

Let's go quickly over the details. The body. Oh, her body. Found. The tests confirm. Raped and strangled. My little darling.

Then, incredibly, he is found too. Trying to do the same thing again but this time to a more savvy family. He even used the name Celia. The sergeant tells me this with glee. "They always think they're so clever, but they're not. They make mistakes." How excited everybody is. They found him. He can't do it again. This is good. But I don't feel happiness, which disappoints everyone.

Jack agrees to go on a talk show. They convince him he will be helping other families and other little girls but really he's there so everyone can feel superior. One lady stands up. She is wearing a sensible dress and shoes. She is a sensible mother, any one can see that, and she says, "I just don't understand, in this day and age, how you could let your daughter go off with a stranger like that?" She says it like she really cares, but she beams when the audience claps because really, she just wants to make her point.

Jack tries to say the stuff about how really everyone takes chances when they send their children off to other homes. I mean we're all really strangers, he says. But they aren't buying it, this clever audience. The sensible lady stands up again and says, "I'm really sorry about what

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happened to your daughter but you gotta accept that it's at least partly your fault." There is scattered applause. The host tries to take it back. "I'm sure no one here means to imply this is your fault," he says, "we only want to learn from your mistakes." The audience applauds at that as well. Everyone gets applause except Jack.

After the taping he calls me in tears. I'm not much help as I am also feeling superior since I would never be so stupid as to fall for the "You're helping others" line the talk show people keep trying. He says it was terrible but on the day it airs, he insists we watch. It is terrible.

We move through the house and our lives. I think I will never eat again and then, one day, I do. I think we will never make love again and then, one night, something like that happens but it is so different, there is such a cold desperation to it, that I think it will never happen again and it doesn't.

Six months later there is a trial. We are both witnesses for the prosecution so we can't attend. The defense attorney does a mean job on us but the prosecutor says, "He's just trying to distract the jury. It's not going to work. In fact, it'll probably backfire, generating more sympathy."

Fuck their sympathy, I say.

Jack looks as if I've just confirmed the worst rumors he's heard about me. The attorney maintains his placid expression, but his tone of voice is mildly scolding when he says, "The jury is your best hope now."

I think of her picking flowers in the garden that afternoon, the way she waved them in an arc across the sky.

When the verdict is read I stare at the back of his head. I think how surely, if I had really studied him that day, instead of being so distracted by self doubt, I never would have let him take her. The shape of his ears at the wrong height, the tilt of his head, something about his shoulders, all of it adds up. It's so obvious now.

"Guilty," the foreman says.

The courtroom is strangely quiet. Somehow, it is not enough.

When Jack and I get home he goes into his office. I wander about, until finally I settle on a plan. I take the fireside poker and walk up the stairs to her room where I smash the computer in. When I'm done Jack is standing there, watching. "That's a very expensive machine," he says.

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"Fuck you," I say.

It doesn't get any better. At the end of the month, he moves out.

FAT WHITE FLAKES fall all day. The pine trees are supplicant with snow. I sit in my rocking chair like an old woman, the blue throw across my lap. I thought about starting a fire with the well-seasoned wood left over from last winter but when I opened the stove and saw those ashes I didn't have the energy to clean them out. I rock and watch the snow fall. The house creaks with emptiness. The phone rings. I don't answer it. I fall asleep in the chair and when I wake it's dark. I walk to the kitchen, turn on the outside light. It's still snowing. I turn off the light and go to bed, not bothering to change out of my sweats and turtleneck. The phone rings and I grumble into the blankets but I don't answer it. I sleep what has become my usual restless sleep. In the morning it's still snowing.

Day after day it snows. Finally, the power goes out. The phone lines are down. I don't mind this at all. Oddly, I am invigorated by it. I shovel the wood burning stove's ashes into an old paint can, find the wood carrier and bring in stacks of wood and kindling. I build a fire and once I'm sure it's really started good, go upstairs and get my book, some blankets and pillows. I find the flashlights in the kitchen, both with working batteries, search through the linen closet and then the kitchen cupboards until I remember and find the portable radio on the top shelf in the basement. I stoke the fire, wrap myself in a blanket. How efficient we were, how well organized, how prepared for this sort of emergency, how completely useless, even culpable, when she needed us most. I turn on the radio. It will snow and snow, they say. We are having a blizzard. There are widespread reports of power outages. The Red Cross is setting up in the high school, which, actually, is also currently out of power so residents are advised to stay home for now. I click off the radio.

The phone is ringing.

"Hello?"

"Mom, where are you?"

"Steff? Steff?"

But there is no response. I stand there, holding the phone while the kitchen shadows lengthen around me. Still I stand there. I say her name

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over and over again. I don't know how long I stand there before I hang up but when I do, I'm a changed woman. If I can't keep her alive, and it's been all too obvious that I can't, I'll take her dead. Yes, I want this ghost.

The person you most love has died and is now trying to contact you. You are happy.

You do whatever you can to help. You go out in the middle of the worst blizzard on record since there has been a record and drive to town. A trip that usually takes ten minutes today takes an hour and a half and you are happy. You go to the local drugstore and walk right past the aisles stripped of batteries and sterno cans and candles to the toy section where you select a Ouija board and tarot cards and you don't care when the clerk looks at you funny because you already have a strange reputation and who even cares about reputation when your dead daughter is trying to talk to you. You are not scared. You are excited. You know you probably should change your expression and look bored or disinterested as the clerk tallies up your purchases on a notepad because the cash register doesn't work because of the power outage and you probably should say something about buying this for your teenage niece but instead you stand there grinning with excitement. You feel the clerk, who looks to be a teenager herself, only a few years older than your dead daughter, watching you leave the store and walk through the storm to your truck, the only vehicle in the parking lot.

It takes even longer to get home and by the time you do the fire has gone out and the house is cold. You are too excited to stop everything to build another fire. Instead you set up the ouija board on the kitchen table. The cat comes over to smell it. You light a candle. The cat rubs against your leg. You sit at the table. You rest your fingers lightly on the pointer. You remember this from when you were young. "Steff," you say, and the sound of it is both silly and wonderful in the silent house. As if, maybe, she's just in another room or something. "Steff, are you here?" You wait for the pointer to move. It does not. "Steff?" Suddenly the house is wild with light and sound. The kitchen blazes brightly, the refrigerator hums, the heater turns on. The phone rings. You push back the chair, stand, and bang your thigh against the table. The phone rings and rings. "Hello?"

"Mom?"

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"Steff, Steff, is that you?"

The dial tone buzzes.

You slam the phone down. The cat races out of the room with her tail puffed up.

You turn to the ouija board. The pointer rests over the word. Yes. You try to remember if you left it there but you don't think you did or maybe it got knocked there when you hit your leg but why are you trying to explain it when there is only one explanation for your dead daughter's voice on the phone? Slowly you turn and look at the silent phone. You pick up the receiver and listen to the dial tone.

You don't know whether to laugh or cry and suddenly your body is convulsing in some new emotion that seems to be a combination of both. You sink to the kitchen floor. The cat comes back into the room and lies down beside you. The dead can't make phone calls but the living can lose their minds. You decide you won't do that. You get up.

You try to believe it didn't happen.

BUT JUST in case, every time the phone rings, I answer it. I speak to an endless assortment of telemarketers wanting to sell me newspapers, a different phone service, offering me exciting opportunities to win trips to Florida, or the Bahamas. Jack calls about once a week and we generally have the same conversation. (I'm fine. He can't come back. I haven't forgiven him. I haven't forgiven myself. I don't expect to. Ever.) Once there is a call where no one speaks at all and I'm terrified to hang up the phone so I stand there saying hello, hello and finally I say, Steff? and there's a click and then the dial tone. Once, an old friend of mine from the city calls and I tell her all lies. How I've begun painting scenes of idyllic life again, how I've begun the healing process. I tell her the things people want me to say and by the end of the conversation she's happy she called and for a few minutes I feel happy too, as though everything I said was true.

I start receiving Christmas cards in the mail, strange greetings of Peace on Earth with scrawled condolences or blessings about this first Christmas without her. Jack calls in tears and tells me how much he misses her and us. I know, I know, I say gently, but you still can't come back. There is a long silence, then he hangs up.

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I go into town only for groceries. I lose track of the day so completely that I end up in the supermarket on Christmas Eve. Happy shoppers load carts with turkeys and gift wrap and bottles of wine, bags of shrimp, crackers and cheese. I pick through the limp lettuce, the winter tomatoes. While I'm choosing apples I feel someone watching me and turn to see a teenage girl of maybe sixteen or seventeen standing by the bananas. There is something strange about the girl's penetrating stare beneath her home-made knit cap though it is not unusual to catch people staring at me; after all, I'm the mother of a dead girl. I grab a bag of apples. I wonder if she knew Steff. I turn to look over by the bananas but she's not there.

"I don't know if you remember me or not."

The girl stands at my elbow. The brown knit cap is pulled low over her brow with wisps of brown hair sticking out. She has dark brown eyes, lashed with black. She might be pretty.

"I waited on you during the first storm at Walker's drugstore."

I nod, at a loss at what to say to the strange, staring girl.

She leans close to me. I smell bubblegum, peppermint, and something faintly sour. "I can help," she whispers.

"Excuse me?"

She looks around, in a dramatic way, as if we are sharing state secrets, licks her chapped lips and leans close again. "I know how to talk to dead people. You know, like in that movie. I'm like that kid." She leans back and looks at me with those dark sad eyes and then scans the room as if frightened of the living. "My name is Maggie Dwinder. I'm in the book." She nods abruptly and walks away. I watch her in her old wool coat, a brown knit scarf trailing down her back like a snake.

"Oh, how are you doing, dear?"

This face sends me back to that day. Snow on tulips. My daughter's death. "Mrs. Bialo, I never thanked you for coming over that morning."

She pats my arm. One of her fingernails is black, the others are lined with dirt. "Don't mention it, dear. I should of made a effort long before. I wouldn't bother you now, except I noticed you was talking to the Dwinder girl."

I nod.

"There's something wrong with that child, her parents are all so upset about it, her father being a reverend and all. Anyhow, I hope she didn't upset you none."

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"Oh no," I lie, "we were just talking about apple pie."

My neighbor studies me closely and I can imagine her reporting her findings to the ladies at the checkout, how I am so strange. I'm glad I lied to the old snoop, and feel unreasonably proud that in this small way I may have protected the girl. It doesn't take a Jungian analyst to figure it out. It felt good to protect the girl.

It's the coldest, snowiest winter on record and Christmas morning is no different. The wind chill factor is ten below and it's snowing. I stack wood into the carrier, the icy snow stinging my face. My wood supply is rapidly dwindling but I dread trying to buy more wood now, during the coldest winter anyone can remember. I can just imagine the bantering, "Lady, you want wood? Seasoned wood?" Or the pity, "Is this, are you, I'm so sorry, we're out of wood to sell but wait, we'll bring you ours." Or the insult, "What? You want me to bring it there? Not after what those parents did to that girl, they should have put them in jail for child neglect, letting her leave like that with a stranger." Head bent against the bitter chill, both real and imagined, I carry the wood inside.

There is nothing like that feeling of coming into a warm house from the cold. I turn on the classical music station, make a fire, fill the teakettle and put it on the kitchen stove. The radio is playing Handel's Messiah, the teakettle rattles softly on the burner, the cat curls up on the braided rug. I wrap my arms around myself and watch the snow swirl outside the window. Inexplicably, it stops as suddenly as if turned off by a switch. The sun comes out, the yard sparkles and I realize I'm happy. The teakettle whistles. I turn to take it off the burner, search through the cupboard for the box of green tea. I wrap the teabag around the teapot handle, pour the hot water. If we never got that stupid computer, if we never (stupidly) let her go with him, how different this morning would be, scented by pine and punctuated with laughter, the tear of wrapping paper and litter of ribbons and bows. I turn, teapot in hand, to the kitchen table and see that the storm has returned to its full vigor, the crystallized scene obliterated. As it should be. In my grief this stormy winter has been perfect.

I find my strange Christmas perfect too. I make a vegetable soup and leave it to simmer on the stove. The radio station plays beautiful music. All day the weather volleys between winter wonderland and wild storm.

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I bring out the old photo albums and page through the imperfect memories, her smile but not her laughter, her face but not her breath, her skin but not her touch. I rock and weep. Outside, the storm rages. This is how I spend the first Christmas without her, crying, napping, in fits of peace and rage.

I go to bed early and for the first time since she died, sleep through the night. In the morning, a bright winter sun is reflected a thousand times in the thick ice that coats the branches outside my bedroom window and hangs from the eaves like daggers. The phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Steff, talk to me, what do you want?"

"Maggie Dwinder."

"What?"

But there is no answer, only a dial tone.

I tear up half the house looking for the local phone book, searching through drawers and cupboards, until at last I find it in Jack's old office on the middle of the otherwise empty desk. Jack used to sit here in a chaos of papers and folders, a pencil tucked behind his ear, the computer screen undulating with a swirl of colored tubes that broke apart and reassembled over and over again. I bring the phone book to the kitchen where I page through to the D's and find Dwinder, Reverend John, and Nancy. My hand is shaking when I dial.

"Hello," a cheerful voice answers on the first ring.

"Hello, is Maggie there?"

"Speaking."

"Maggie, I spoke to you on Christmas Eve, at the grocery store."

"Uh-huh?"

"You said you could help me."

"I'm not sure I, oh." The voice drops to a serious tone. "I've been expecting you to call. She really has something important to tell you." While I absorb this, she adds, "I'm really sorry about what happened." Her voice changes to a cheerful tone, "Really? All of it? That's great!"

"I'm sorry I — "

"No way! Everything?"

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"Maggie, are you afraid of being overheard?"
"That's the truth."
"Maybe you should come over here."
"Okay, when?"
"Can you come now?"
"Yeah, I have to do the dishes and then I can come over."
"Do you know where I live?"
"Doesn't everybody?"
"Can you get here, or should I...?"
"No. I'll be over as soon as I can."

SHE TOOK SO LONG to arrive that I started watching for her at the window. In the midst of more bad weather, I saw the dark figure walking up the road. At first, even though I knew she was coming, I had the ridiculous notion that it was Steffie's ghost, but as she got closer, I recognized the old wool coat, the brown knit hat and scarf crusted with snow. She walked carefully, her head bent with the wind, her hands thrust in her pockets, her narrow shoulders hunched against the chill, her snow-crusted jeans tucked into old boots, the kind with buckles. I asked myself how this rag doll was going to help me, then opened the door for her. For a moment she stood there, as if considering turning back, then she nodded and stepped inside.

"You must be freezing. Please, take off your coat."

She whipped off the knit hat and revealed straight brown hair that fell to her shoulders as she unwrapped the long wet scarf, unbuttoned her coat (still wearing her gloves, one blue, the other black). I took her things. She sat to unbuckle her boots, while I hung her things in the hall closet. When I returned, she sat at the kitchen table, hunched over in a white sweatshirt. It occurred to me that she might fit into one of Steffie's baggier sweaters but I offered her one of mine instead. She shook her head and said (as she shivered), "No thanks, I'm warm enough."

"Do you want some tea?" She shrugged, then shook her head. "Hot chocolate?"

She looked up and smiled. "Yes, please." I opened the refrigerator, took out the milk. "I like your house. It's not at all like I heard."

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I pour the milk into the pan. "What did you hear?"

"Oh, different stuff."

I set the pan on the burner and start opening cupboards, looking for the chocolate bars from last winter.

"Some people say you're a witch."

This is a new one and I'm so startled by it that I bang my head on the shelf. I touch the sore spot and turn to look at her.

"Of course I don't believe it," she says. "I think of you more as a Mother Nature type."

I find the chocolate and drop two bars in with the milk.

"I never saw anyone make it like this before. We always just add water."

"We used to make real whipped cream for it too."

"Of course I wouldn't care if you was, 'cause, you know, I sort of am."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you know, like, I told you, dead people talk to me."

I stir the milk to just below a boil then pour two mugs full. There is a temporary break in the weather. Sun streams across the kitchen table. I hand the little witch her mug. She holds it with both hands, sniffs it, and smiles.

"You don't look like a witch."

She shrugs. "Well, who knows?"

I sit across from her with my own mug of hot chocolate. Yes. Who knows? All I know is that Steffie told me she wanted Maggie Dwinder. So here she is, sipping hot chocolate in my kitchen, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with her.

As if sensing my inquiry, she stops sipping and looks at me over the rim of the cup. "She wants to come back."

"Come back?"

"She misses you, and she misses it here." She slowly lowers the cup, sets it on the table. "But there's a problem. A couple problems, actually. She can't stay, of course. She can only be here for a little while and then she has to go back."

"No, she doesn't."

"She's been gone a long time."

"You don't have to tell me that."

She bites her chapped lips.

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"I'm sorry. This isn't easy for me."

"Yeah. Anyway, she can't stay. I'm sorry too but that's the way it is. Those are the rules and, also...."

"Yes?"

"I don't think you're going to like this part."

"Please tell me."

She looks up at me and then down at the table. "The thing is, she doesn't want to stay here anyway, she sort of likes it where she is."

"Being dead?"

Maggie shrugs and attempts a feeble smile. "Well, you could say that's her life now."

I push back from the table, my chair scraping across the floor. "Is that supposed to be funny?" Maggie shrinks at my voice. "Why?"

"I don't know," she says, softly. "Maybe she figures she sort of belongs there now."

"When?"

"What?"

"When does she want to come?"

"That's why she talked to me. 'Cause she said you've been really upset and all but she wonders if you can wait until spring?"

"Spring?"

"Yeah. She wants to come in the spring. If it's okay with you." Maggie watches me closely as I consider this imperfect offer, my daughter returned but only borrowed from the dead. What rational response can there be? Life is composed of large faiths, in the series of beliefs that sustain us, we little humans whose very existence is a borrowing from the dead. I look into Maggie's brown eyes, I fall into them and feel as if I'm being pulled into the Earth. All this, as we sit at the kitchen table, a world done and undone, a life given and taken. "Yes," I say. "Tell her spring will be fine."

We are like one of my paintings. Small, in a vast landscape. The snow glistens outside. We are not cold, or hungry, or anything but this, two figures through a lit window, waiting.

Maggie and I became friends of sorts. She liked to sit in the kitchen and chat over hot chocolate about her school day. (Most of her classmates, and all her teachers were "boring".) The cat liked to sit in her lap.

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There were no more phone calls from Stephanie. "Don't worry about that," Maggie reassured me, "she'll be here soon enough and you can really talk."

It was the worst winter on record. Maggie said that the students were really "pissed" because they would have to make up days in June.

I grew to look forward to her visits. Eventually we got to talking about painting and she showed me some of her sketches, the ones assigned by the art teacher; boxes, shoes, books, and the ones she drew from her imagination; vampires and shadowed winged figures, pictures that might have warned me were I not spending my days painting girls picking flowers, with dark figures descending on them. I thought Maggie was wise. She understood and accepted the way the world is, full of death and sorrow. This did not seem to affect her happiness. On the contrary, she seemed to be blossoming, losing the tired, haggard look she had when I first met her. I mentioned this to her one day over hot chocolate and she opened her mouth, then bit her lip and nodded.

"What were you going to say?"

"I don't know if I should."

"No, go ahead."

"It was your daughter."

"What was my daughter?"

"She was wearing me out. I know she wasn't meaning to but it's like she was haunting me ever since she, I mean, she wouldn't leave me alone."

"That doesn't sound like Steffie."

"Yeah, well, I guess people change when they're, you know, dead."

I nod.

"Anyway, it stopped once I talked to you. I guess she just wanted to make sure you got the message."

I remember that time as being almost joyful. What a relief it was to think of our separation as temporary, that she would return to me as she had been before she left, carrying flowers, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with happiness.

I got the phone call on a Tuesday afternoon. I remember this so clearly because I marked it with a big black X on the calendar, and also, that day, though it was already April, there was another storm, so sudden that six

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motorists were killed in a four-car pileup, one of them a teenage boy. But that was later, after Maggie's parents left.

Maggie's mother calls in the morning, introduces herself and says that she and her husband want to talk to me, could they stop by for a visit.

How can I refuse them? They are Maggie's parents and I'm sure concerned and curious about this adult she is spending so much time with. Nancy, Maggie's mother, sounds nice enough on the phone. When they arrive an hour later, I think I could like her and, to my surprise, the Reverend too.

She has a wide pleasant face, lightly freckled, red hair the color of certain autumn leaves, and hazel eyes that measure me with a cool but kind mother-to-mother look. She wears a long dark wool skirt, boots, and a red sweater.

Her husband has a firm handshake and kind brown eyes. His hair is dark and curly, a little long about the ears. He has a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. I am immediately disturbed and surprised to find myself somewhat attracted to him. He wears blue jeans and a green sweater that looks homemade and often worn.

They sit side by side on the couch. I sit in the rocker. A pot of tea cools on the table between us, three cups and saucers on the tray beside it. "Would you like some tea?"

Nancy glances at her husband and he nods. "Thank you," he says, "allow me." He reaches over and pours tea for the three of us. I find this simple gesture comforting. How long it has been since anyone has done anything for me.

"I have to thank you," I say, "you've been so kind about allowing Maggie to visit and her company has been much appreciated."

They nod in unison. Then both begin to speak. With a nod from his wife, the Reverend continues.

"I feel I owe you an apology. I should have visited you much sooner and then, perhaps, none of this would have happened." He laughs one of those rueful laughs I was always reading about. "What I mean to say is, I should have offered you my services when you were suffering but I thought that you probably had more spiritual assistance than you knew what to do with." He looks at me hopefully.

But I cannot offer him that redemption. Oddly, there had been no one.

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Oh, many letters offering prayers, and accusations, and a couple Bibles mailed to the house, but no one stood and held my hand, so to speak, spiritually. There was something distasteful about my involvement in Steffie's horrible death; no one wanted any part of it.

He looks into his teacup and sighs.

"We're sorry," Nancy says in a clear, steady voice. "We've been involved with our own problems and because of that it seems we haven't always made the right choices. It's affected our judgment."

"Please, don't worry about it. You're kind to come now."

The Reverend sets his cup on the table. "We're here about Maggie."

"She's a lovely girl."

Nancy sets her cup and saucer on the table, licks her lips. I smile at the gesture, so reminiscent of her daughter. "We thought, well, we want you to understand, we hope you understand, that we thought you, being an artist, and Maggie, being so creative...."

The Reverend continues. "We prayed and pondered, and thought maybe you two would be good for each other."

"We made the choice to let her be with you for both your sakes."

"Certainly we had no idea."

"Oh, no idea at all."

Suddenly I feel so cold. I sit in the rocking chair and look at the two of them with their earnest faces. I want them to leave. I don't understand yet what they've come to say, but I know I don't want to hear it.

The Reverend looks at me with those beautiful eyes and shakes his head. "We're sorry."

Nancy leans forward and reaches as though to pat me on the knee but the reach is short and she brushes air instead. "It's not her fault. It's just the way she is. We only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive her."

The Reverend nods. "We know what we're asking here, a woman like you, who has so much to forgive already."

My hands are shaking when I set my teacup down. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The Reverend just looks at me with sorrowful eyes. Nancy nods, bites her lower lip and says, "We know what she's been telling you," she says. "We found her diary."

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I open my mouth. She raises her hand. "I know, I would have thought the same thing. It's horrible to read your child's diary, but I did, and I don't regret it." She glances at her husband who does not return the look. "How else can a mother know? They're so secretive at this age. And I was right. After all, look what she's been doing."

I look from her to the Reverend. "We know, we can guess how tempting it's been for you to believe her."

"She's ill, really ill."

"We knew this even before — "

"I read her diary."

"But we never thought she...."

"How could we? We hope you understand, she's mentally ill. She didn't mean to cause you pain."

The cold moves through me. Why are they here with their petty family squabbles? So she read her daughter's diary, while I, imperfect mother, never even looked for Steffie's, or had any idea what her e-mail address was. Why are they here apologizing for their living daughter? Why do I care? "I'm not sure I — "

"There's also a scrapbook. If I would have known, if we would have known — "

"A scrapbook?"

The Reverend clears his throat. "She was obsessed with your daughter's death. I try to understand it, but God help me, I don't. She saved every article — "

"Every picture."

I imagine Maggie cutting out newspapers, gluing the stories into a red scrapbook, the kind I had as a girl. "It's all right," I say, though I'm not sure that it is. "A lot of people were fascinated by it." I imagine myself on an iceberg, drifting into the deep cold blue.

The Reverend opens his mouth but Nancy speaks, like a shout from the unwanted shore. "You don't understand. We know what she's been telling you, about your daughter coming back, and of course, we hope, you realize, it's all made up."

There. The words spoken. I close my eyes. The ice in my blood crashes like glass. The Reverend's voice whispers from the distance. "We're sorry. It must have been tempting to believe her — "

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"She called me. I spoke to her."

He shakes his head. "It was Maggie."

"A mother knows her daughter's voice."

"But you were so upset, right? And she never said much, did she? And in your state — "

"Nancy," the Reverend says gently.

The room is filled with sad silence. I can't look at either of them. How stupid I have been, how unbearably stupid. I see the Reverend's legs and then his wife's unbending.

The world is ending, I think, all darkness and ice, like the poem.

"We should leave," says the Reverend.

I watch the legs cross the room. Listen to the closet door, the rattle of hangers. Whispering. "We're sorry," says Nancy. Footsteps in the kitchen. Door opened. "Snow!" Closed.

All darkness and despair. The greatest loneliness. A shattering. Ice. Who knows how long until at last I throw the cups across the room, the teapot, still full. Brown tea bleeds down the wall. I scream and weep into darkness. Now I know what waits at world's end. Rage is what fills the emptiness. Rage, and it is cold.

HOW WE SUFFER, we humans. Pain and joy but always pain again. How do we do this? Why? Some small part of me still waits for spring. Just to be sure. I know it is absurd, but the rational knowing does not change the irrational hope.

I figured Maggie's parents had told her that they talked to me. I couldn't imagine she would want to face my wrath, though she couldn't know that I didn't even have the energy for anger anymore. Instead I felt a tired sorrow, a weariness with life. She did come, in the midst of a downpour, knocking on my door after school, wearing a yellow slicker. I finally opened the door just a crack and peered out at her, drenched like a stray dog, her hair hanging dark in her face, her lashes beaded with water.

"Go home, Maggie."

"Please. You have to talk to me."

She is crying and snot drips from her nose toward her mouth. She wipes it with the back of her hand, sniffing loudly.

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I simply do not know what to say. I close the door.

"You were the only one who ever believed me!" she shouts.

Later, when I look out the window, she is gone, as if I imagined her, made her up out of all my pain.

I decide to sell the house though I don't do anything about it. I sleep day and night. One day I realize I haven't seen the cat for a long while. I walk around whistling and calling her name but she doesn't appear. I sit at the kitchen table and stare out the window until gradually I realize I'm looking at spring. Green grass, leaves, tulip and daffodil blooms thrust through the wreck of the garden. Spring. I open windows and doors. Birds twitter in branches. Squirrels scurry across the lawn. Almost a year since we lost her. Gone. My little darling.

Then I see someone, is it, no, in the garden, picking daffodils, her long dark hair tied with a weedy-looking thing, wearing the dress she had on last year, tattered and torn, my daughter, my ghost.

"Stephanie!" I call.

She turns and looks at me. Yes. It is her face but changed, with a sharpness to it I had not foreseen. She smiles, raises her arm and sweeps the sky with flowers and I am running down the steps and she is running through the garden calling, "Mom, Mom, Mom!" I think when I touch her she will disappear but she doesn't, though she flinches and squirms from the hug. "You can't hold me so close anymore," she says.

So I hold her gently, like the fragile thing she is, and I'm weeping and she's laughing and somehow, with nimble fingers she braids the bouquet into a crown which she sets on my head. She covers my face with kisses, so soft I'm sure I'm imagining all of it but I don't care anyway. I never want to wake up or snap out of it. I want to be with her always. "Steffie, Steffie, Steffie, I've missed you so much."

She has bags under her eyes and her skin is pale and cold. She stares at me, unsmiling, then reaches up, takes the crown from my head and places it on her own. "You've changed a lot." She turns and looks at the yard. "Everything has."

"It's been a hard year," I say to her narrow back and bony elbows. She looks like such a little orphan, so motherless standing there in that dirty dress. I'll make her something new, something pretty. She turns and looks

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at me with an expression like none I'd ever seen on her in her lifetime, a hate-filled face, angry and sharp. "Steff, honey, what is it?"

"Don't. Tell. Me. How hard. This year. Has been."

"Oh sweetie," I reach for her but she pulls back.

"I told you. Don't touch me."

"At all?"

"I'm the queen," she says. "Don't touch me unless I touch you first."

I don't argue or disagree. The Queen, my daughter, even in death maintains that imagination I so highly prize. When I ask her if she is hungry she says, "I only ate one thing the whole time I was gone." I feel this surge of anger. What kind of place is this death? She doesn't want to come inside while I make the sandwiches and I'm afraid she'll be gone when I come out with the tray, but she isn't. We have a picnic under the apple tree which is in white bloom and buzzing with flies, then she falls asleep on the blanket beside me and, to my surprise, I fall asleep too.

I wake, cold and shivering, already mourning the passing dream. I reach to wrap the picnic blanket around me and my hand touches her. Real. Here. My daughter, sleeping.

"I told you not to touch me."

"I'm sorry. Honey, are you cold?"

She rolls over and looks up at me. "You do realize I'm dead?"

"Yes."

She sets the wilted crown back on her head and surveys the yard. "You really let everything go to shit around here, didn't you?"

"Stephanie!"

"What?"

Really, what? How to be the mother of a dead girl? We sit on the blanket and stare at each other. What she is thinking, I don't know. I'm surprised, in the midst of this momentous happiness, to feel a sadness, a certain grief for the girl I knew who, I guess, was lost somewhere at the border of death. Then she sighs, a great old sigh.

"Mom?" she says, in her little girl voice.

"Yes, honey?"

"It's good to be back."

"It's good to have you here."

"But I can't stay."

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"How long?"

She shrugs.

"Is it horrible there?"

She looks at me, her face going through some imperceptible change that brings more harshness to it. "Don't ask the dead."

"What?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want the answer to."

"Just stay. Don't go back."

She stands up. "It doesn't work like that."

"We could — "

"No, don't act like you know anything about it. You don't."

I roll up the blanket, pick up the tray. We walk to the house together beneath the purple-tinged sky. When we get to the door she hesitates. "What's wrong?" She looks at me with wide, frightened eyes. "Steff, what is it?" Wordlessly, she steps inside. I flick on the kitchen light. "Are you hungry?"

She nods.

The refrigerator is nearly empty so I rummage through cupboards and find some spaghetti and a jar of sauce. I fill a pan with water and set it on the stove.

"Is Dad coming back?"

"Would you like to see him?"

She shakes her head vigorously.

"Steff, don't be mad at him, he didn't know — "

"Well, he really fucked up."

I bite my lip, check the water. Where is my little girl? I turn and look at her. She is walking around the kitchen, lightly brushing her hand against the wall, a strange, unlovely creature, her hair still knotted with a weed, crowned with wilted daffodils.

"Do you want to talk about it, what happened to you?"

She stops, the tips of her fingers light against the wall, then continues walking around the room, humming softly.

I take this to be a no. I make spaghetti for six and she eats all of it, my ravenous ghost child. What is this feeling? Here is my dead daughter, cold and unkind and difficult and so different from the girl she used to be that only now do I finally accept that Stephanie is gone forever, even as she sits before me, slurping spaghetti, the red sauce blooding her lips.

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* * *

The dead move in secrets, more wingless than the living, bound by some weight; the memory of life, the impossible things? Dead bones grow and hair and fingernails too. Everything grows but it grows with death. The dead laugh and cry and plant flowers that they pick too soon. The dead do not care about keeping gardens in blossom.

Dead daughters don't wear socks or shoes and they won't go into old bedrooms unless you beg and coax and then you see immediately how they were right all along. Dead daughters have little in common with the living ones. They are more like sisters than the same girl and you realize, just as you miss the daughter you've lost, so does the dead girl miss, really miss, the one she was.

The dead pick up paint brushes and suddenly their hands move like rag dolls and they splatter paint, not like Jackson Pollack, or even a kindergartner. All the paint turns brown on the paintbrush and drips across the canvas or floor or wall, until they, helpless, throw it to the ground.

All the dead can do is wander. You walk for hours with your dead daughter pacing the yard she will not (cannot?) leave. She picks all the flowers and drops them in her step. She sleeps suddenly for hours, and then does not sleep for days. She exhausts you. The days and nights whirl. The last time you felt like this was when she was an infant.

One day, as you sit at the kitchen table, watching her tearing flowers from the garden in the new dress you made that already hangs rag-like and dirty around her, you think of Maggie Dwinder and you realize you miss her. You put your face in your hands. What have you done?

"What's wrong with you?"

You would like to believe that she asks because she cares but you don't think that's true. Something vital in her was lost forever. Was this what happened at death or was it because of how she died? You accept you'll never know. She refuses to talk about it, and really, what would be the point? You look at her, weedy, dirty, wearing that brittle crown. "Maggie Dwinder," you say.

"As good as dead."

"What?"

She rolls her eyes.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me, young lady."

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"Mother, you don't know anything about it."

"She's your friend, and mine. She told me you would come. She suffered for it."

"Oh big deal, mommy and daddy watch her very closely. She has to go see the psychiatrist. She doesn't have any friends. Big fucking deal. What a hard life!"

"Steff."

"Don't tell me about suffering. I know about suffering."

"Steff, honey — "

"Everyone said it was a mistake for me to come back here. They said you wouldn't like me anymore."

"Honey, that's not true. I love you."

"You love who I used to be, not who I am now."

"Well, you're dead."

"Like it's my fault."

The dead are jealous, jealous, jealous and they will do anything to keep you from the living, the lucky living. They will argue with you, and distract you, and if that doesn't work, they will even let you hug them, and dance for you, and kiss you, and laugh, anything to keep you. The dead are selfish. Jealous. Lonely. Desperate. Hungry.

It isn't until she brings you a flower, dead for weeks, and hands it to you with that poor smile, that you again remember the living. "I have to call Maggie."

"Forget about her."

"No, I have to tell her."

"Look at me, Mommy."

"Sweetheart."

"Look what you did."

"It wasn't me."

She walks away.

"It wasn't."

She keeps walking.

You follow. Of course, you follow.

The phone rings. Such a startling noise. I roll into my blankets. Simultaneously I realize the night was cool enough for blankets and that

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the phone didn't ring all summer. I reach for it, fumbling across the bedside table, and knock off the photograph from Steff's last birthday.

"Hello?"

"See you next spring."

"Steff? Where are you?"

There is only a dial tone. I hang up the phone. Throw off the covers. "Steff!" I call. "Steff!" I look in her bedroom but she's not there. I run down the stairs and through the house, calling her name. The blue throw is bunched up on the couch, as if she'd sat there for a while, wrapped up in it, but she's not there now. I run outside, the grass cold against my feet. "Steff! Steff!" She is not in the garden, or the studio. She is not in the yard. A bird cries and I look up through the apple tree branches. One misshapen apple drops while I stand there, shivering in my nightgown. Everything is tinged with brown, except the leaves of the old oak which are a brilliant red.

A squirrel scurries past. There is a gentle breeze and one red leaf falls. I wrap my arms around myself and walk into the house, fill the teakettle, set it on the burner to boil. I sit at the kitchen table and stare at the garden. I should plant some bulbs. Order firewood. Arrange to have the driveway plowed when it snows. The teakettle whistles. I walk across the cool floor, pour the water in the pot. I leave it to steep and go to the living room where she left the blue throw all balled up. I pick it up and wrap it around myself. It smells like her, musty, sour.

It smells like Maggie too, last Christmas Eve when she spoke to me in the supermarket. What a risk that was for her. Who knows, I might have been like Mrs. Bialo, or her parents, I might have laughed at her. Instead, I became her friend and then cast her aside at the first sign of trouble.

How many chances do we get? With love? How many times do we wreck it before it's gone?

I don't even drink the tea but dress in a rush. All my clothes are too big on me and I see in the mirror how tired I look, how much new gray is in my hair. Yet, there's something else, a sort of glow, a happiness. I miss her, the one who died, and her ghost is my responsibility, a relationship based on who we lost, while Maggie is a friend, a relationship based on what we found.

All summer I only left for groceries. She would stand at the top of the

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driveway, watching me with those cold narrow eyes as if suspicious I wouldn't come back. Out of habit I look in the rearview mirror, but all I see is a patch of brown grass, the edge of the house.

It's easy to find the Dwinder residence. They live right next to the church in a brick house with red geraniums dropping teardrop-shaped petals onto the porch. I ring the bell. Nancy answers, in a pink terry cloth robe.

"I'm sorry, I forgot how early it is."

She brushes a hand through her red hair, "That's all right. We were getting ready for church."

"There's something I have to tell Maggie. Is she home?"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Honey, who is it?" The Reverend comes to the door in plaid flannel pants and a T-shirt, his dark hair tousled, his face wrinkled with sleep. "Oh. Chloe, how are you?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, it's just — "

"She wants to talk to Maggie."

"I'll tell her you're here." The Reverend turns back into the house.

Nancy continues to stare at me, then, just as I hear Maggie saying, What does she want? she blurts, "She's been better since she's stopped seeing you." I'm not sure if this is meant as an accusation or an apology and before I can find out, Maggie comes to the door dressed in torn jeans and a violet T-shirt, her hair in braids. She meets my gaze with those dark eyes.

"Coffee's ready!" the Reverend calls and Nancy turns away, her pink-robed figure receding slowly down the hall.

"Yeah?"

"I was hoping, if you can forgive me, I was hoping we could be friends again."

"I can't be her replacement, you know."

"I know."

"You hurt me a lot."

"I know. I'm sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

She frowns, squints, then tilts her head slightly, and looks up at me. "I guess."

"Please. Stop by. Any time. Like you used to."

She nods and shuts the door gently in my face.

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* * *

On a sunny but cold day, as the last crimson leaves flutter to earth, and apples turn to cider on the ground, I shovel last winter's ash onto the garden. A flock of geese fly overhead. I shade my eyes to watch them pass and when I look down again, she is standing there in baggy jeans and an old blue pea coat, unbuttoned in the sun.

It's as though I've been living in one of those glass domes and it's been shaking for a long time, but in this moment, has stopped, and after all that flurry and unsettling, there is a kind of peace. "Maggie."

For a moment we only look at each other, then she puts her hand on her hip, rolls her eyes, and says, "You wouldn't believe what they're making us do in gym, square dancing!"

All life is death. You don't fool yourself about this anymore. You slash at the perfect canvas with strokes of paint and replace the perfect picture of your imagination with the reality of what you are capable of. From death, and sorrow, and compromise, you create. This is what it means, you finally realize, to be alive.

You try to explain this to Maggie. You hear yourself talking about bitter seeds, and sweet fruit. She nods and doesn't interrupt but you know you have not successfully communicated it. This is all right. The grief is so large you're not sure you want her, or anyone, to understand it, though you wish you could describe this other emotion.

You stand in the ash of your garden. All this time you didn't realize what you'd been deciding. Now you are crying, because with the realization of the question comes the answer. It is snowing and white flakes fall onto the garden, sticking to the brown stems and broken flowers, melting into the ash. You look up to the sunless white sky. Cold snow tips your face and neck. You close your eyes, and think, yes. Oh, life. Yes.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

SSDD

THE IDEA OF the author as franchise was not a new one in the mid-20th century: There were series books aplenty, YA creations like the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, the Oz books, adult detective series featuring characters such as Mike Hammer and Nero Wolfe; and there were writers like Harold Robbins and Arthur Hailey who could be counted upon once a year to deliver more-or-less the same bugcrusher novel, only with a different setting and different names for approximately the same cast of characters. However, Stephen King's career came along as publishing was mastering the art of the author as mega-franchise, setting forth authorial analogs of Burger King and Wendy's to compete with the McDonald's-like empire that swiftly grew from the publication of *'Salem's Lot*. With King, readers knew what they were getting. The menu was somewhat varied, but whether a Happy Meal like *Carrie* or supersized like *The Stand*, you could always count on a heapin' helping of King's basic ingredient, this being not gruesome horror, but sentiment. Turns out that King hasn't been so much trying to scare our socks off as he's been hoping to reassure us that while bad things do indeed happen to good people, goodness just keeps on keepin' on. Scrape away the demons, aliens, vampires, giant spiders, and germs, and you'll find at the core of every King novel a big gooey heart whose golden oldies backbeat preaches the indefatigability of the human spirit, all fleshed out with those trusty characters you've come to know and love: Maine rednecks; mentally challenged savants; crazed militarists; embittered losers; ordinary

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joes with supernatural woes, and so on.

Every beloved populist writer from Dickens to Grisham has relied on a tried-and-true stable of tropes, and the interesting thing is watching how they use them and what they choose to illuminate by that usage. Along the way King has written insightful and entertaining books about teenagers *(Christine)*, the varieties of human frailty (*The Shining* and others), and ought else, but perhaps his most abiding writerly concern has been the purifying armor of friendship, especially childhood friendships as detailed poignantly in "The Body," which became a decent Rob Reiner picture, *Stand By Me*; much less poignantly in *It*, which was regurgitated as a regrettable mini-series; and most recently in *Dreamcatcher*, which has been incoherently condensed into a Lawrence Kasdan-William Goldman script that plays out like a season of truly abysmal *X-Files* episodes jammed into a hundred-and-thirty-four minutes, and essentially consists of action sequences larded with clumsy passages of exposition, a number of which entail various characters explaining things to *themselves*. If that's not clear enough, the film is abjectly horrible, unintentionally laughable, not in the least scary, among the worst films ever made from King material, ranking merely a notch or two above abominations like *Silver Bullet*, *Sleepwalkers*, and King's own directorial effort, *Maximum Overdrive*.

Dreamcatcher was King's first completed project after a near-fatal car accident and it seems that as he wrote, his body of work must have been passing before his eyes. At six hundred-plus pages, the novel reads like one of those TV-promoted repackaged Greatest Hits albums sold only at K-Mart — you got your Native American magic (the dreamcatcher, a ritual object whose function is never satisfactorily explained in the movie); you got your telepathy; you got your aliens; you got your other aliens; you got your boyhood chums gifted with psychic powers by a mentally challenged lad, Duddits (Donnie Wahlberg), they rescued from bullies who, in something of a foreshadowing, were forcing him to eat what we used to call in high school "a Lincoln Log." Grown to manhood, the chums, whose bond is established in the film by having them repeat various sarcastic catchphrases, the most notable being SSDD (Same S**t, Different Day) — an acronym that would have

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made a more apt title for the project — are gathered for a hunting weekend at a cabin in the Maine woods when the storm of the century leaves them virtually snowbound. Out hunting for deer, Beaver (Jason Lee) encounters another hunter who is afflicted with a vile fungal rash, prodigious belches, and hellish flatulence. Back at the cabin, Jonesy (Damian Lewis) and Beaver look on as all the forest creatures flee an unknown menace, while the hunter bloodily produces from his bowels a creature that bears a striking resemblance to that which Duddits almost ate, only with teeth. Lots of teeth. Meanwhile, Pete (Timothy Olyphant) and Henry (Thomas Jane), off on a beer run, crash their car in order to avoid a half-frozen, rash-afflicted woman sitting in the road. Henry goes to seek help, leaving behind an injured Pete. As Pete is peeing Duddits's name into a snowbank (with remarkably good penmanship, I should add), the wormlike creature who has surreptitiously exited the woman's bowels attacks his writing implement.

Into this juvenilely accented phantasmagoria enters Colonel Abraham Kurtz (Morgan Freeman), the crazed leader of a black ops military unit that has been engaged in covering up UFO incursions and slaughtering aliens for lo these many years. Freeman, who seems throughout to be pleading for audience sympathy, saying between the lines, Hey, a man's gotta work, is cursed with some of the worst dialog in recent memory. Gazing out a window at the detention camp wherein he has penned civilians who may be infected with the alien rash, he laments having to kill them and says, "These people drive Chevys. They shop at Wal-Mart. They never miss an episode of *Friends*. They're Americans." Then off he flies to carpetbomb a crashed alien vessel, unmindful that Jonesy, whose body has been possessed by a giant bipedal variant of the bowel creatures (they're able to transform themselves into a swirling reddish dust for possession purposes), is heading for Boston, where he intends to slip a bowel creature into the water supply and thus destroy civilization as we know it. Since one creature alone can contrive so prolific a contagion, it's unclear why it's necessary to start things in Boston. Why not the closer-at-hand Derry?

A Red Sox hater, perhaps.

The most apparent byproduct of being possessed by an alien is that Jonesy now speaks in a pert English accent, giving rise to the impression that the alien invasion

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may have been launched from some heretofore unguessed-at off-planet backwater of the British Empire. Jonesy himself is trapped inside his brain, wandering about in a metaphorically constructed memory warehouse whose internal architecture is redolent of late-period Florentine Renaissance, busy hiding folders containing secret knowledge about Duddits from the alien's prying mind. Henry, imprisoned by Curtis, manages to persuade the colonel's second-in-command, Owen Underhill (Tom Sizemore), that only Duddits, now stricken with leukemia, can save the world. This excessive waddage of plot culminates with Duddits pitifully tottering into battle clutching a stuffed Scooby Doo doll and a Scooby Doo lunchbox full of cancer medication, a battle whose outcome hinges upon the fact that aliens capable of controlling human minds, biting people in half, and building a spaceship the size of Portland seem baffled by the problem presented by opening a manhole cover with a crowbar. Perhaps they're cousins to the aliens in *Signs*, who exhibited a similar curious dysfunction as regards cellar doors.

There are no end to logical gaffes in *Dreamcatcher*, but listing them would beg the issue. Where Kasdan (who once made a couple of decent movies) and Goldman (who served King far better in his scripts for *Misery* and *Hearts in Atlantis*) went wrong was in eliminating the sentiment of the book and turning it into an action horror flick. Five or six minutes more footage would have been sufficient to allow us to relate to the adult versions of the four friends. Though they are scarcely unique characters, it has always been one of King's great knacks to make us care about people to whom, if we were to meet them in the world, we might pay no more than nominal attention. He persuades his readers of the beauty of the ordinary, brand-name consensus that cloaks the mechanisms of our culture, and of the specialness of the individual, no matter how small-minded or deluded or debased. However you might judge him as a writer, he shows us the hearts of real estate agents, car dealers, gas station owners, janitors, accountants, and many other salt-of-the-culture types (perhaps more significantly, he shows us how they perceive themselves), and the concern we feel for these folks permits us to overlook the illogics, the unwieldy plot devices, the repetitions, the supernatural flotsam and jetsam of desultorily imagined

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spooks and demons and creatures that crop up in his lesser novels, of which *Dreamcatcher* is surely one. Kasdan and Goldman have focused on what is really the least compelling element of King's work; the horror — horror is only the hook of the song he sings, not the beat that gets us dancing; they have directed us to consider the bad things and not the good people. Thus Pete, Jonesy, Beaver, and Henry come across as somewhat annoying pencil sketches and our sole interest lies in wondering which of them will die and how and when this will occur.

I used to be put off by King's penchant for investing mentally challenged people with wild talents or extreme purity of heart. It seemed and still seems a kind of indignity visited upon such people that we are asked so frequently to consider them as sacred vessels, God's (or the Devil's) chosen. Furthermore, it has become tiresome. While watching *Dreamcatcher*, however, I noticed a mentally challenged kid sitting nearby and realized that the only time his interest was fully engaged was when Duddits was on-screen. It occurred to me — snidely — that the movie had found its audience, but then I thought how few role models this kid must have, and I recalled another kid, severely abused, mentally beaten down by a domineering father, to whom I gave several King novels and how reading them provided him an escape from his circumstance and ultimately enabled him to get some distance from the oppressive force in his life. Populist writers do what they do. It's their inclusiveness that makes them so effective. Few can read a King novel and — though they may not appreciate the craft involved in the achievement this implies — not find someone with whom they can at least partly identify. Stephen King has been the target of much critical snobbery, some of it my own, some of it deserved — pretense, when it rises to a certain level, demands critical dismissal. But the generous inclusiveness of King's casts of characters, the attentiveness he lavishes on their predictable reactions, the canonization of their mundane observances, the oversimplified karmic particularity of their fates, his often overly patient charting of their irresolute and unremarkable courses...that's his job. Though King's later work has, in my opinion, been less disciplined and impressive than his earlier; though there are assuredly writers of greater precision and insight and technical

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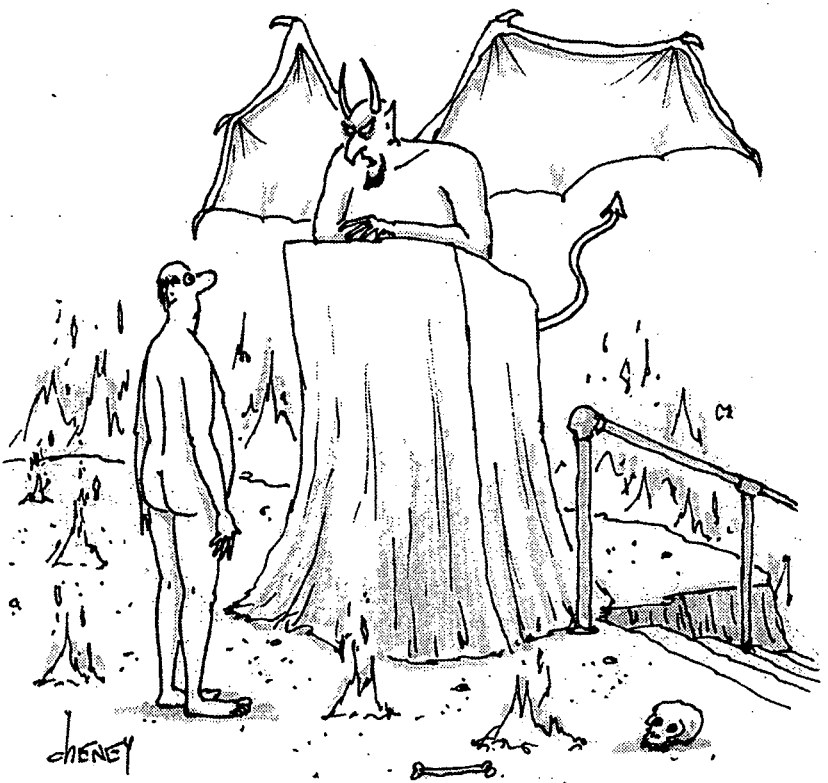
skill, writers more capable of fulfilling a lofty ambition, of illuminating some new corner of possibility or the human psyche, no one has come along to supplant him. The gig is still his, and despite hiccups like *Dreamcatcher*, both the book and its celluloid bowel creature, he's done pretty damn well at it overall. ☙



"Because you refused to stop using 'impact' as a verb."

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Robin Aurelian, whose last story to appear here was "A Choice of Graces" back in our March 1999 issue, returns with a funny piece concerning alien relations and the sacrifices one must sometimes make for the good of the planet.

Foreign Exchange

By Robin Aurelian

MY WIFE MARISA ALWAYS arranged for a foreign exchange student to stay with us over the holidays. She felt sorry for them, so far from home and family; she was one of a number of people in Downport who contacted the Foreign Students Union at the university and volunteered to host someone who couldn't afford the time or money to head home over the winter break. I'd liked about half the people she'd found. Last year's student had been repulsive, young, female, and weepy, a drag on us all. I'd asked Marisa to specify someone different this year.

I'd put in a full day tending my special projects at the greenhouses over on Lombard, and I was ready for a shower when I climbed out of my commutepod half an hour before dinnertime. Marisa met me at the partment lock, hair wild the way it got when she'd tugged on it in frustration, her dark eyes half-lidded. "Neil, the new student's here."

"Bugs. Give me half an hour."

"Fifteen minutes."

So much for a leisurely lounge about in hot water, one thing in my day

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I anticipated with pleasure, but oh, well. When I left the refresher ten minutes later, Marisa waited in our sleep room, fidgeting, using the remote to shift the scene on the wallwork every two seconds. Nerve-wracking.

"What is it?" I pulled on a body suit, wondered if it would be enough. When we dined with just the family, I could get away with shorts, but now that we had company — "How could it be any worse than Weeping Wilda last year?"

"It's one of the new aliens," she said.

"Bugs." Where had she left it? In the company room, where it could access the household functions and our accounts? In the partment's control compartment, where it could screw up all my settings? In the guest room, where it was theoretically welcome? And where had she left Amy, our ten-year-old daughter? Alone with a stranger? "Why?"

"I thought he'd be different," she said. "He is."

"Different in a bad way," I said, not a question, really, considering how she was dealing with it.

She started crying. Between sobs, she said, "Amy's at Darien's partment for the night."

"Good." One less thing to worry about. "Guess I better meet the guest."

Marisa took a deep breath, went to the sink and washed her face, then returned, tucked her hand in mine, and led me to the company room.

For a new type of alien, he looked not so very different from us. Bilateral symmetry, a head at the top, if appearances didn't deceive me, and four limbs, though all their terminal buds rested on the floor. Was he quadripedal, then? What did he use to manipulate things? Every sentient race we knew had some way to touch and shape its environment.

"Jiwa Kinsa, this is my husband, Neil," Marisa said.

"You spoke," said the alien. His voice was a pleasant baritone, his inflections a perfect mimicry of announcer's Standard. "You are female. You must not speak until I choose to acknowledge your presence. I am hungry. You may bring me French fries now."

Marisa fled.

"I don't know what hospitality is like on your planet — " I began.

"Allow me to enlighten you. The guest is treated as a god. The hosts defer. Do not speak until I acknowledge you."

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"That's not going to work for me," I said.

"You wish to offend those from my world."

"No. Well, maybe."

"You wish to cause interplanetary friction and bring the wrath of our war council down on your planet. We have biointerruptors that cause instantaneous cell death of all living systems. You wish us to deploy these here?"

"Nope, that's not what I wish."

"Then you will choose silence until I give you leave to speak."

I fled my own self, went back to the sleep room, shut the door and palmlocked it, pulled down my interface, and hotlined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I got a live human on the other end and said, "One of the new aliens is a guest in my home — "

"I'm sorry," said the woman. She wore her red-and-white-striped hair in an upswept flame shape, popular last year.

"He's threatening to annihilate our planet if I speak to him without permission, and he ordered my wife to serve him food. Is there anything to his threats, or can I kick him out of the house?"

She paled. "We don't know much about their capabilities. When they first got here, they demonstrated their ferocity by vaporizing an uninhabited Aleutian island, so we know they have the power. What is he doing at your house?"

"My wife and I host foreign exchange students every year around the holidays."

"Oh, Ixis. You got the baby. He's worse than all the others."

"What are we supposed to do? Let him order us around?"

She dredged up a ghastly parody of a smile.

"You're kidding," I said.

"For the good of your planet, and perhaps for your own survival.... I'm sorry," she said, and hung up on me.

Marisa slipped into the sleep room. "Neil?" she whispered. "I downloaded some fries, a lot of them, and left him to gorge. Did you figure out what to do?"

I looked at her. She read my face.

"How long is winter break?" I asked.

"Two weeks," she whispered.

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* * *

Aside from constantly ordering us around, demanding food and our silence, and taking offense at new things when we stopped doing all the old offensive things, Jiwa Kinsa shed scaly flakes of skin anywhere he sat. The Jiwa had a strange scent that didn't bother us at first, but the longer we spent in the partment with him, the worse he smelled. He didn't need more than three hours of sleep in any twenty-four hour period. Anytime he was awake, of course, he wanted us to be at his service. This didn't go over well with either of our bosses at work. I called the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and asked them to make our excuses, and, bless the red-and-white-striped-haired woman, they did. Because we were doing Earth's government a service, we were granted two weeks' unpaid leave to tend to our guest, and the assurance that our jobs would still be there when our guest was gone.

In the few moments Marisa and I shared in bed with each other, she whispered that she didn't believe such assurances. Her job as a telephone face for a downtown company was always at risk; she had a perfect attendance record — that was the only reason she had never lost it. Hundreds of people were waiting for her job if she failed.

My job had more security. Few were as interested as I was in my medical experiments in the Lombard greenhouses, but while I was taking care of our guest, my experiments were running without data collection. The data would be suspect if I let the situation continue.

Amy came home the second day the Jiwa was at our partment. He ordered her to strip for him so he could study human anatomy on a less-than-fully-formed human, and I risked death and a verbal flaying by whisking her back out of the partment before she even thought about obeying.

I left Marisa alone with the Jiwa while I lined up alternate housing for Amy for the rest of break and bought an industrial-strength mini-vacuum cleaner and some nose filters for me and Marisa.

Then I stopped by the greenhouses to check on my work. I had no one trained to take my place while I was gone. I was working on developing plant-produced inhalant forms of medication. I hated losing time and effort to anything at home when I had such interesting work to do. I ran what checks I could on the plants, and collected samples of the latest product, which looked promising.

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I had been too long away from the partment. I went home, and found the Jiwa staring at a soap opera on the 3V, Marisa kneeling before him, her face to the floor, as he used her to rest all four of his arms' terminal buds.

It was unbearable. But he would not even let me speak of my willingness to take her place. He sent me to the foodgiver to get him alcohol and snack food.

He never left the partment. He established his presence in the company room, where all our entertainment channels were centered, right near the foodgiver so that we had to go past him every time we wanted to eat, and then wait for permission before addressing the foodgiver on our own behalf, permission which he often withheld. During one of his brief sleep periods, I arranged with the ministry to install a second foodgiver in our sleep room. Otherwise we would have starved.

The presence of our guest would have been even more unbearable if we hadn't had a mission of our own: to record everything we learned about him. What he liked to eat, what he liked to watch, the exact things he said to us as closely as we could recall, what irritated him, what pleased him, even what he smelled like. If one of us were in the company room with the Jiwa, the other might be in the sleep room typing up observations on the interface and sending them direct to the ministry. As we stored information to transmit, we comforted ourselves that our humiliation served a higher purpose.

Marisa and I worked out a schedule where I could go to the greenhouses once a day under the pretense of shopping and check my plants' progress. I also managed to spend half an hour a day with my daughter. Unfortunately, this schedule involved my wife being used as a footstool. I spent some footstool time of my own so Marisa could slip out and visit Amy every day too. As a consequence, I became familiar with two of the afternoon 3V dramas. Once the Jiwa became accustomed to the fact that 3V drama women went around with their eyes in plain sight, and everybody spoke without waiting for permission from whoever was senior in the room, he was totally sucked into the stories, and so was I. I reported that night that humans did have a point of convergence with the new aliens. Neither the Jiwa nor I liked to have our soaps interrupted for any reason.

Marisa was most miserable on Winter Day, thinking of how we had

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celebrated it in all the years before now, first with each other, and then centered around Amy. Each of our previous foreign exchange student guests had told us about their own winter holidays, and that had added to our joy.

This year I didn't even realize the holiday had come, but Marisa knew. She cried while she got the morning's installment of fries from the foodgiver.

At least our daughter was staying with a friend who celebrated properly. She would be sharing drizzleberry pancakes with her best friend's family, and they would have the presentfall in the corner, presents hovering in an antigravity well that had been there for three days, so everyone could look and speculate. This morning after breakfast the presents would jump into the arms of those they were meant for. Marisa and I had taken Amy's presents over to the partment earlier in the week during our brief breaks. We had not been able to spend as long on wrapping as we usually did, having to sneak the sessions in while the Jiwa was on bathroom breaks.

On Winter Day, we had our morning coffee while the Jiwa was eating, and we shared holiday whispers. We ducked into the hallway for a moment and kissed each other where the Jiwa could not see and complain.

"Neil-jolla!" he cried.

I went back into the company room. "What is it, Jiwa Kinsa?"

"Where is the remote?"

The holiday went downhill after that, when the Jiwa discovered that most of the regular 3V programming had been preempted in favor of various displays of holiday celebrations. His howls of outrage brought us a flurry of calls from neighboring partments. We had to invest in pay-per-experience romance 3Vs to pacify him.

Finally I took out the experimental plant-produced inhalants I'd harvested that week, something I was developing for police departments to use to subdue rioters. I hadn't tested it on anyone yet, and of course, the Jiwa was an alien, though our air was breathable for him. I was so tired of taking everything he gave us that I decided a little peace at home might be worth an intergalactic incident.

Marisa and I wore nose filters all the time because of the Jiwa's odor. I replaced our filters with stronger ones and let the new inhalants loose in

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the company room while the Jiwa was laughing at Worlds Wide Wrestling. In two minutes, he was emitting the sound he made when asleep, a fretting, ripping noise like the back of one's pants splitting and being sewn back together repeatedly.

At last Marisa and I could spend our holiday appreciating each other. We locked ourselves into our sleep room and downloaded special foods from our foodgiver, decorated each other's naked bodies with the warm liquid foods and ate from each other's hands. We had a blessed half hour to enjoy each other before the inhalants wore off and the Jiwa bellowed our names.

WE GOT OUR LIVES back a week later, when the Jiwa moved back to his dorm on campus. It took us a further week to scrub his scent out of the walls and vacuum up all the scales he had shed. Some we found in our sleep room, and in Amy's room, and Marisa and I had some moments of disquiet, wondering when he had gone to those two places we had thought safe from him, and what he had done there. Mostly, though, we were so relieved we didn't care.

Marisa's job was gone when she reported back, despite the ministry's assurances. Another firm hired her to be a face, though; after she took leave, some of her regular customers had deserted her old firm, and registered feedback in the general databank. On the strength of that, she actually got a better salary at her new job.

My medical experiments continued. I added data from my experience with the Jiwa and got government grants.

As Winter Day approached the following year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted us. "We'd like to send you on a special mission," said the woman with the red-and-white-striped hair, only she had changed it into a green-and-blue checkerboard beehive. "Our negotiations with the new aliens have advanced to the point that we have obtained permission from them to send someone to guest at one of their houses on the new alien reservation over the holiday. Your reports were so good and complete last year that your names were on top of the candidate list."

"What?" I said. "We can stay in one of their houses and order them to serve us as we served the Jiwa last year?"

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"Our research leads us to conclude that the ruder you are in such a situation, the more power you establish, so yes. You would do your government a service if you would fart in their faces." She permitted herself a small smile.

Marisa and I consulted each other with glances and small touches of hands. I nodded to her, and she turned to the interface. "Um," she said, "Thank you, but no way in hell."

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This past January, various news agencies reported that two fish-cutters at the market in New Square, New York heard a 20-pound carp shout apocalyptic warnings in Hebrew. Luis Nivelo does not understand Hebrew, but his coworker, Zalmen Rosen, said he heard it say Tzaruch shemirah *and* Hasof bah. *The remarkable carp was butchered for gefilte fish by Mr. Rosen.*

Harvey Jacobs sent us "Spawning" in December of 2002. What's strange is not how much the world resembles a Harvey Jacobs story (many of us had already observed as much) but how little the world does to hide its sources of inspiration.

Spawning

By Harvey Jacobs

I

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1963, on his weekly trip to the supermarket on Presidio Avenue in San Francisco, Alan Bragle filled his wagon with the usual staples, what he considered necessities: cereal, eggs, milk, a lettuce, tomatoes, bananas, six apples, frozen broccoli, spinach, mixed peas and carrots, some sliced ham, Muenster cheese, a seven-grain packaged bread, a container of orange juice with some pulp, two gallons of bottled water, and a tomato-shaped plastic container of house-brand ketchup. The ketchup was on sale with a coupon he'd cut out of the *Chronicle*. He didn't usually buy house-brand ketchup because, unlike a traditional ketchup bottle, the plastic tomato gasped air and spit red oozy worms when he pressed its sides; the last bloody dregs were impossible to access. But the price was right.

Alan's first produced play was about one of those tomato-shaped horrors and his ancient electric coffee maker that made a hissing, slurping,

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heavy breathing racket. The tomato and the percolator were the only characters; the play had no dialogue besides their erotic liquid huffing and puffing. It was performed at a local coffee house that featured the work of emerging avant-garde artists of which he considered himself one, albeit the oldest in that crowd.

Alan was about to turn forty and already had several swings at bat in the theatrical ballpark, but since he hadn't exactly emerged, he felt at home in the presence of aspiring writers, poets, filmmakers, actors, painters, and sculptors who still had bits of shell and twigs from the nest tangled in with their young dreams. Most of the troop accepted him without question. For some he was a benevolent father figure, tall, slightly bent like an elongated crescent moon, with a long face, big ears, and large, sympathetic blue-green eyes that someone once described as the yolks of bird eggs. A few of the neophytes resented him since he reminded them of the possibility of failure, even death. Alan was seasoned enough and wise enough to shrug off both views and just go about his work.

In any case, his play, *The Ersatz Tomato and The Passionate Perk*, was a rousing success for all concerned. Following a spirited audience autopsy, probing method and meaning, Alan was invited home by the girl who played The Perk and scored with her on a futon that lay like an animal skin on her linoleum floor.

The next morning, she told him she was not a promiscuous girl by nature but subject to PCSS. Alan felt secure enough to ask her what that meant considering the fact that he was slightly obsolete when it came to certain acronyms and the names of current celebrities. She told him PCSS meant Post Creative Stress Syndrome, that impersonal sex was the best way she knew of sloughing off the tension and depression that came when a performance ended. Alan accepted that and went off to his day job as manager of a health food restaurant. He realized The Perk had spared him from his own version of PCSS and felt grateful to the lovely bud.

One of the dividends of mingling with the intense emerging was an occasional unexpected merging that always left him optimistic about the future. He was in no hurry to be discovered. The few gray hairs he'd noticed on his head, chest, and privates gave little cause for alarm. The Perk was easily half his age but if he felt warmly protective, even paternal toward her (and the others who'd opened to him), he didn't really feel

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older, not in the cosmic sense, only slightly wiser. "Being forty," he told many girls, "means that I've lived two minutes for every minute you've lived, give or take, and that's all it means, no more, no less, no big deal."

When Alan finished his shopping for basics he always allowed himself two secret pleasures. To counteract what he called the organic arrogance of his customers (who chewed sprouts and gargled a new product called soy milk), he'd buy himself a package of trusty Mallomars, Little Debbies, Yankee Doodles, or Oreos — some familiar oral outrage to remind him of his humanity. Alan's other gratification was to stand staring at the fish counter, part killing ground, part aquarium.

While he was allergic to just about anything that lived in an ocean, river, lake, or stream, he was fascinated by the looks and shapes of aquatic life forms. The wet gloss of shrimp, the black skins of trout, the turgid gray of carp, the blush of snapper, the silver-speckled salmon, the camouflaged carapace of live lobsters, their pincers bound with rubber bands, the whole display of creatures newly dead on fields of chipped ice or the surely doomed crawling through greenish tank water left Alan feeling as if he were gazing into another dimension.

The expressions on the fish faces, resignation or startle, were strangely calming, outside ordinary time. Round, golden eyes or beady eyes like capers looked back at him through thick glass without seeing or accusing; indifferent eyes from some magical realm. Sometimes Alan let himself enter the fish bodies and sense himself streaking through fields of seaweed or gardens of anemone, thrashing and jumping in luminous pools. Other times he identified with the imprisoned lobsters waiting for the hand that would lift them squirming and drop them into the boiling pot. The fish counter was the best show in town.

After staring awhile, pretending indifference, Alan would usually push his wagon to Check Out, enjoy the pings of the register, pay his bill, and head home. But on this particular evening Alan stayed too long watching a thug lobster bully a cull.

His mind drifted to a dangerous shoal. The thought came to him that his transient, fragile existence was vulnerable to the net, trap, or hook. Worse yet, like those lobster lives, his own life was *On Hold*. Those dark thoughts made him shiver. He shifted his eyes from the tank and found himself face to face with a fat-bellied salmon that had been propped up on

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its ice bed in a swimming position. It hovered like a submarine waiting to fire a load of torpedoes; it seethed like a malevolent mermaid obsessed with revenge. Then Alan saw the salmon's fins wave like fans while its gills seemed to pulsate with the rhythm of a nervous heart. The salmon's lipless plier mouth snapped open and a deep, salty voice said, "*Spawn!*"

The command vibrated through him. Alan trembled. The items in his wagon rattled loudly enough so that a woman waiting for a pound of seafood salad jumped back from the counter and glowered. A clerk asked him if anything was wrong. Perplexed and embarrassed, Alan spun his wagon around and headed for refuge among Cookies and Cakes. He walked between walls of donuts, pies, cupcakes, muffins, fudge sticks, chocolate chips, jelly rolls, cinnamon buns, composed himself in that sugary aisle, then headed for the shortest line to escape.

Walking to his car, Alan was in a sweat. His forehead gushed water; he swabbed his cheeks with a handkerchief. That ridiculous voice, a dead salmon's voice no less (obviously some kind of auditory hallucination brought about by stress and fatigue), echoed in his head. "*Spawn!*" It was a voice powered by supreme authority. A Five-Star General's voice. Moses's voice ordering the Red Sea to split. A voice that impaled like a spike, ruthless as a bathroom mirror.

"*Spawn!*" Alan replayed the fishy fiat again and again on the ride home, through a restless night, at work the next day. He frightened himself but assumed that the voice would gradually fade, then retreat to where it belonged in some subconscious cave. He'd planned to work on a new play that evening but he was much too distracted for sustained concentration. The minute he forgot the voice it roared in his ears. So he hooded his typewriter and went downtown to a bar called *The Oval Orifice* where poets read their latest creations followed by comments from a polyglot audience.

When he arrived at the bar the poets were already reading. Alan saw several familiar faces in the crowd, and there were greetings waved back and forth. He ordered a glass of chianti, perched on a stool, and listened to a woman recite a sonnet, coincidentally called *Bottom Feeder* attacking the absurdity of her devotion to her lover's penis, gluttonous as an eel. Alan flexed at the eel imagery since it forced his mind into water, but the salmon voice was silent.

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After some praise and blame from critics in the room, the woman was replaced at the microphone by a young, bearded man in a black suit, white shirt, and bow tie named Irwin Plotnik. A crowd favorite, Plotnik carried a Bible and began his presentation by thumping the book thirteen times. Then he shouted:

Lord, they say You work in mysterious ways,
They say accept and offer praise,
Enough that You promise to amaze.
They tell this sheep to bleat and graze
On blades of grass like question marks
Ignoring the menace of damps and darks,
To zip my fly and mend my ways;
Lord, I say fuck Your mysterious ways;
On moonless nights and sunless days
In moments of supreme exposure,
I, IRWIN PLOTNIK, DEMAND FULL DISCLOSURE

"*Spawn! Spawn! Spawn!*" Alan's head exploded with the eruption of sound. He swallowed what was left of his Chianti, dropped a few bills on the bar, and pushed through applause on his way to the door. Outside, he sucked great draughts of misty air blowing in from the Pacific. In a few minutes, he was joined by Plotnik who came out to smoke the stub of a reefer. Alan acknowledged him with a nod.

"I saw you at the bar, Alan. So what did you think?"

"Good poem, Irwin. Disturbing."

"How so?"

"That the lord works in *mysterious ways* isn't exactly a hot news bulletin. It's probably the most significant conceit of religion, the foundation for faith. I mean, if it isn't true there's no hope for hope, no reason for optimism, no chance that the universe might be rational or just."

"I suppose," Plotnik said, sucking at the diminishing roach.

"What I'm getting at is that your demand for full disclosure is reasonable but dangerous."

"Tough shit."

"Who can say what might be disclosed? And what would the end of

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mystery mean to our screwed-up species? And all you can say is tough shit?"

"What do you want me to say, shmuck? Why should a deity have the chutzpah to hide inside a Sunday puzzle?"

"Too much disclosure too soon could be catastrophic. Those *mysterious ways* could be the indirect path to direct communication. Gradual revelation is a concept that...."

"Too mysterious for me, old dude," Plotnik howled into the fog bank. He pinched the end of his butt and wrapped its remains in a piece of aluminum foil. "That poem was rejected by seven magazines so far. The editors must all be retro pussies like you." Then he spit on the sidewalk and went back into the bar.

Alan walked toward no place in particular. Distant fog horns moaned in chorus. Instead of inhabiting the heavy air, some trick of acoustics made their wet music rise from the ground as if the city's sewers complained. The horns quit suddenly, leaving soggy silence. In that soundless void Alan faced another frightening thought: He considered the possibility that the voice that haunted him could be God's own voice.

Why would the lord speak to Alan Bragle through an iced fish? Why not? Just another in a long series of his famous *mysterious ways*. Wasn't the fish an ancient symbol for mystery, probably dating back to amphibious ancestors?

Alan was forced to accept that he might be a worthy candidate for heavenly conversation. He knew it was a crazy idea that belonged in the head of a madman, but a case could be made. He devoted his days to hard labor and his nights to the examination of inner and outer stars. His ambition was to serve through illumination. He was a willing lightning rod distilling experience into art. He was a good person, not too greedy, who often made joyful noises even in the face of looming chaos. He was warm hearted, appreciative of beauty, sincere and compassionate — no less deserving of special attention than, say, a Fatima or Joan of Arc. For a moment, Alan felt himself glow like a firefly. The wave of elation crested and smashed when he heard the shriek of a police siren, or was it an ambulance on the way to pick up a corpse?

God's voice? Alan's astonishing display of egotism made him giggle.

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And what if he had been chosen? Chosen for what? To "*Spawn!*" Some blessing.

He'd learned about the joys of spawning in Junior High. Talk about *mysterious ways;* it was the fate of a salmon to leave its freshwater birthplace, swim a zillion miles downstream avoiding every obstacle and predator, find its way to the endless ocean, enjoy a few years paddling around, then, at some inner behest, at the height of its power, in the prime of life, to schlep itself back upstream to its nursery, find a mate — *Spawn!* — hatch a brood and drop dead from exhaustion.

Was the peek-a-boo lord sending Alan Bragle a code message or was it the glass of wine he'd swallowed on an empty stomach? Or was he catching the flu, feeling the first burst of fever? Whatever the source of his misery, Alan knew that someday he could use the experience for a dynamite comedy. Working title: *Something Fishy*. He tried to shake his head clear of the whole subject but the maneuver failed. Bottom line, was a chilled Chinook that different from a burning bush? No, this was no passing fancy. Alan began to weep in the street. In his heart of hearts he knew he'd been marked for suicide, a lobster about to be yanked from the tank by his own hand. He made a fist, half expecting to find his fingers bound by rubber bands.

Oh, Alan thought, he could delay his destiny, flail around, hide under his bed for a while, talk to a psychiatrist, read self-help manuals, but ultimately he would be forced to submit to invisible powers. He made a decision. It was best to yield willingly, to preserve some vestige of dignity in the sawtoothed jaws of oblivion; Alan Bragle decided to swim upstream and "*Spawn!*"

It struck him as ironic that the tears he wept were salty. One of the lord's little jokes? "Full disclosure, my ass," Alan said to a passing cat, half expecting the cat to twitch its whiskers and answer with some wiseass remark.

II

On a frigid morning in December, Alan Bragle stood in a tiny wooden hut waiting for the Shell Island Ferry. A few hours earlier he'd watched great masses of clouds from the window of a Boeing 707 reflect morning sunlight. The clouds seemed thick enough to deflect rogue asteroids, stray

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comets, or Russian missiles. They formed a protective, golden roof over an America still reeling from Jack Kennedy's death. Hours earlier, Alan saw stars the size of honeydews roll through pitch-black space. Looking down, he browsed a vast sleeping land abandoned except for little enclaves of patterned electric life. Then the sky fragmented into purples, blues, and reds as eastern dawn gained dominance.

The redeye from San Francisco was his first flight on a jumbo jet. Twenty years earlier Alan headed West by Greyhound bus, hitchhiking when his money ran out, sacking out in YMCA dormitories that stank of piss, pus, and booze, listening to drunks and drifters wheeze, spit, and fart their way through nightmares, make snotty sounds, scream garbled names like Mary, Joe, Billy, Cherry, Bobby, Harry, Fatty, Betty in the dirty dark. Alan gave each name a face, sometimes even a body. He loved every minute of that trip. He took notes on a yellow pad.

Flying back, looking up, looking down, smoking Lucky Strikes, nursing a scotch and soda, Alan was content to preserve the stars, the dawn, the clouds in memory. Saving his impressions in a notebook made no sense. He was going home to "*Spawn!*," gasp, and go belly-up; he was beyond the pull of gravity.

The plane landed at Idyllwild Airport in Queens. Alan waited at a caddy until his suitcase fell out of a black hole and moved around the silver turntable on the slow-motion journey he called baggage time. He grabbed for the bulging case stuffed with a few shirts, a pair of blue denims, rolled socks, his razor, toothbrush, and comb but mostly with manuscripts and folders he'd packed for the hell of it. Those pages represented ten years of labor, thousands of hours spent hunched over his Royal Portable, a billion cigarettes, countless epiphanies. *Something* would be said at his funeral; better that the text was scripted than left to parents who never liked him much or to some minister mumbling generic praise — better to leave specific instructions for reading choice selections from his own collected works. He'd already assembled a rough draft of sterling excerpts.

Next, Alan negotiated a price with a gypsy cabdriver for the trip to the North Fork of Long Island. It was an outrageous luxury but in the long run that made no difference whatsoever. He would be cremated, no frills, his ashes tossed into the Atlantic at no additional expense. The saving over a box and plot would more than pay for his limo.

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He relaxed against the leather seat of a Lincoln Continental, relishing the ride after so many years of transporting himself in a cramped VW Bug or breaking his overused ass on busses and cable cars. He told himself that, for a serious spawner, *getting there* was more than *half the fun*; it was at least fifty-one percent of the fun.

Alan had called his folks to tell them the prodigal son was returning. He wondered if they'd be at the ferry dock to meet him. He'd also requested that they find his Shell Island High School yearbook if it was still somewhere around the house. To "*Spawn!*" required a spawnee, and while he knew that most of the Class of '41 was surely accounted for, there might be two or three fertile stragglers desperate enough to show some interest in a brief but productive alliance.

To search out a co-conspirator on the mainland was a deadening prospect, uncertain, inconvenient, draining, and expensive. Besides, Alan suspected that if he'd agreed to sacrifice his seed without complaint, the lord should willingly provide a ready egg or two. If there were a god who cared enough to issue Alan's spawning orders, that same god would make some effort to participate in the process.

Maybe an angel in the form of a frog, chicken, deer, or tree had already talked with a Shell Island lady who anticipated Alan's arrival. She might be tidying up her house, swallowing oysters, and taking perfumed baths while his chariot gobbled up the miles on the Long Island Expressway. Alan closed his eyes and contemplated the relationship between angels and earthlings.

Was there really something out there watching over him or was this all a grand illusion traceable to faulty synapses? Who could take the risk of defying his creator? That would be as stupid as building a nest on the dome of a nuclear reactor. If Alan was a random soul picked out of a hat for some divine testing of the species, what would be the consequences if he rejected *The Call*? The whole planet could implode or whirl into a consuming sun. Alan Bragle didn't want to be the cause of that. He liked birds, flowers, baseball, and willowy girls in rain-drenched yellow slickers. Also, it was important to him that a few enlightened readers survive to conjure up his ghost, however long that resurrection might take. For the truly creative, self-interest didn't diminish with death; death was the beginning of immortality.

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The gutsy Shell Island Ferry, hardly more than a large toy, banged against half-submerged pilings as it floundered into its berth. One rusty pickup truck drove aboard, its rear bumper decorated with a faded sticker that said *SUMMER PEOPLE...SUMMER NOT.* Alan was the only pedestrian passenger.

As the boat got underway, Alan looked back at a desolate winter landscape. The bare trees seemed made of ancient bones. It might have been better to "*Spawn!*" in spring but that wasn't his assigned timetable. He focused on gray water roiled by freezing wind. A shrieking gull flew through the spray, possibly remembering other crossings when summer tourists tossed crumbs over the ferry's railing. The gull made arcs and loops on a blank page of sky, a flight path that reminded Alan of his first disastrous penmanship lessons.

Alan watched the mainland recede as Shell Island rose up from the horizon like a dragon's back. He felt as if he'd last seen the island twenty minutes ago, not twenty years, or was it twenty centuries? That time could telescope in a blink had always puzzled Alan. As the island grew, he thought about sitting in the Shell Island Palace, the movie playhouse that shared the building with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a boy of seven or eight wondering how a film about fighter pilot aces that spanned all of World War I could happen in under two hours. He sensed back then that time was an accordion. Time was no more than a convenient fantasy. There was no time. Ah, but there was. And time had weight; it was heavy as lead. Did Einstein know that?

Alan sniffed the air. In the past, Shell Island had its own smell, sometimes sweet, sometimes soured by swamp gas. He couldn't smell anything on this crossing, and he could see that the landscape had changed. There were many more houses on the heights and along the curving beach, many more piers and jetties. The postcards his mother sent every few months often complained about real estate booms and too much alien traffic.

When the ferry docked, Alan quickly spotted his father huddled in a pea coat, hands hidden in deep pockets. Harry Bragle wasn't wearing a hat. What was left of his hair had turned white. His white hair, capping an anxious red face, reminded Alan of a melting ice cream sundae at the Yum Yum Shoppe, a shack on Crab Creek that stayed open all year.

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Was the Yum Yum still there? Was anything *still there*?

On the ride to the house, Harry told his son that, since he'd retired from his job at the hardware store, he'd made himself and Alan's mother miserable, so he decided to go back to work. "You won't believe this," his father said, "but Mom and I bought Nibby's Fish Market. Nibby bought a place down in Florida and he gave us a very good price. So we bought it."

"A fish market? You bought a fish market? What do you know about fish?"

"What I don't know, I'll learn. What's to learn? Nibby introduced me to his suppliers. They deliver the fish, I sell the fish. We're adding a room with five tables for a restaurant. Mom will handle the cooking. You remember her cooking?"

"I absolutely do," Alan said, trying. "So, a fish market." *Mysterious ways.*

"Well, Alan, I've got to tell you we were surprised as hell when you announced that you were coming home. And, frankly, relieved. We almost wrote you off, kid. We thought you were water under the bridge. What made you homesick?" Alan knew it was impossible to tell his father he'd been sent back to "*Spawn!*" His mother, maybe, but Harry Bragle, no. He shrugged.

"I'm not exactly sure, Pops," Alan said. "But if you're worried about having me around the house for the next millennium, it won't happen. After I get my bearings I'll be out of your way. I've saved a few bucks. I'll take a room someplace and think about the next step."

"Whatever you want," his father said. "There aren't many jobs on Shell Island, not in the winter. Things pick up when the 212's come back."

"You lost me."

"That's what we call weekenders. 212's. That's the Manhattan area code, get my meaning? So, is it true that San Francisco is fag city? Well, we've got our pansies here, too. Nowadays they hold hands in the street. Faggots, dikes, and Jews. That's where the money is. Jesus H. Christ, what a world."

The Bragle house, a blue cottage with green shutters, was just past the Episcopal Cemetery. His parents had their plots there. They got the last available tract. The frost-speckled cemetery looked comfortable enough. There was something to be said for a satin-lined coffin warmed by heat

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from Earth's fiery core and a solid granite tombstone to mark your plot. For citizens of Shell Island, moving to the cemetery was like moving next door. It was easy to appreciate that continuity. But all things considered, Alan's choice of cremation and ashes-in-the-sea was more prudent. And the irony: A striped bass that nibbled his dregs might easily end up on ice in Nibby's Fish Market filleted by Harry Bragle. How *mysterious* can you get?

"What goes around comes around," Alan said.

"Meaning what?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking." Alan wished he had Irwin Plotnik's address to drop him a line about *full disclosure.*

That evening, after finishing a stuffed chicken seasoned with herbs, Alan's mother produced the high school yearbook he'd requested. Priscilla Bragle sat next to her son on the sofa while he thumbed through its still-shiny pages, examining the smiling faces of the Class of 1941. All the graduation pictures showed teeth except his own, the barbered boys with their Clark Gable cool, the gussied girls expectant as June Allyson playing a bride. Alan's face was knotted in a scowl. "I never liked that picture of you," his mother said. "You look so suspicious, Alan," his mother said. "So angry."

"I was furious."

"About what?"

"I dunno. I think it was because I had no ambition that made any sense. You know I hated high school. Everybody hated me. I hated me."

"How can you say that? Under your picture they wrote *Look out Shakespeare, here comes Alan! Favorite Song: Stardust. Favorite Film: King Kong. Favorite Book: Action Comics. Favorite Sport: Cynthia Dickinson.* That doesn't sound very hateful."

"Cynthia Dickinson hated that. She didn't even know I was alive."

"You should have asked her to the prom."

"Who says I didn't?"

"At least you knew you wouldn't be drafted because of your knee." Alan's left knee never healed after he fell off a jungle gym in kindergarten. It still hurt on rainy days.

"That knee business didn't exactly make me feel good about myself. Being a card carrying 4F was one of the reasons I ran away from here. I had to find my own war. So, do you ever hear anything about Cynthia?"

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"She married a chiropodist. They live around Sayville."

"What about that one? The one with bangs. Amy Griffing."

"I think she was killed in a car crash. It was tragic."

"Mary Ellen Halahan?"

"I heard she became a nurse. Her family moved off-island years ago."

"Astrid Archer? The one we called Asteroid?"

"Her first husband died in the Battle of the Bulge. I was told she went to Germany with some Army doctor. I suppose they're married now."

"Betty Lane?"

"Still here. She married Johnny Silvia. They have five kids. He works for his dad doing septic tanks. You should look them up."

Marsha Karville, Lila Loome, Shirley Morris, Nancy Nevins, Jane Oliphant, Patsy Porter, Lana Quint, Estelle Robling, Rhoda Ston, Yvette Uber, Kathy Vaughn, Virginia Watkins (there were no Xs), Sandra Yodle, Serena Zork. Priscilla Bragle could account for most of the females Alan considered palatable. The ones with juice were all taken, over the rainbow, vanished into their futures. Except for Serena Zork.

"Serena? The chubby one? So adorable as a child. She's a waitress down at the Couch Potato."

"Where's the Couch Potato?"

"Used to be the Quiet Clam, before that, Arnold's Kitchen? On Crescent Beach? We used to go there for pizza?"

"Yeah, yeah," Alan said. "Lousy pizza, soggy crust."

"Poor Serena never married. She stayed home to take care of her mother who went senile. Dead now. She still has the house on Cooper Drive. The father left them ages ago. I was thinking of offering her a job when we get the restaurant going. Funny you should ask about that one."

Serena Zork. Alan found himself a candidate just before falling through the alphabet. The Yearbook listed her nickname, *Rolypoly*. Cute cameo face, long brown hair, mountainous breasts, small waist, wide hips, a formidable ass, solid legs, fleshy arms. *Favorite song: All of Me. Favorite Film: Gone with the Wind. Favorite Book: Anything by Emily Dickinson. Favorite Sport: Field Hockey.*

She was good in English, wrote slushy poems. Alan once showed Serena Zork a play he wrote about Clark Kent and Bess Truman. She liked it. He never forgot a wet dream he had about Serena. In the dream she

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confessed that she was not an ordinary girl, she was part cantaloupe. Filled with seeds. Prophetic?

Harry Bragle came into the room. "I heard you talking about ambition," he said. "I hope you brought some back with you. It's not too late to make something of yourself, kid. Colonel Sanders didn't start Kentucky Fried Chicken until he was in his sixties, so they say. I was thinking, you might want to help us put Nibby's into shape. The place is falling apart. If you're ready to work, there's work to do and you could write your plays at night like sane people who need to make a living."

"Sane people?" Alan said.

"You know what I mean. Regular people."

"He's still pissed about the psychiatrist," Alan said.

"Please don't use language like that in front of your mother. I wasn't even thinking of your shrink."

"It wasn't my idea," Alan said. "It was the school counselor who sent me. They knew I was depressed. I didn't make much effort to hide it. What was it the doctor told you? Your son is anal retentive, obsessive-compulsive, orally fixated, regressive — a potential ding-dong."

"And I told that witch doctor his diagnosis was a little too fancy, a little too pricey for a Shell Island family," Harry said. "That shut his face."

"And your father was right, Alan. There was nothing wrong with you except growing pains," Priscilla said. "Anyhow, it's water under the bridge."

"Twenty years and he's still frantic about spending fifteen bucks on that hour."

"Fifteen bucks was fifteen bucks in those days," Harry said.

Later, Alan went walking around his old stomping grounds. Except for a monolithic neo-Victorian house at the end of the street, complete with a tennis court and swimming pool, things were pretty much as he remembered them.

He recognized trees, taller and thicker now, and a circle of rocks on an empty lot where he once played Stonehenge. Alan cast himself as the last of the Druid Kings, speaking an arcane language of grunts and growls in a squeaky, pre-adolescent voice. He chanted ancient legends and prayed to multiple forest gods asking that his testicles descend in a blast of lightning and crash of thunder. In fact, it took another year before his balls

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filled with honey; the transformation was lethargic, but better late than never.

Standing in that rock circle, a forty-year-old man filled with nostalgia for a twelve-year-old boy, — *"Spawn!" "Spawn!" "Spawn!"* — the echoing rumble interrupted his reverie. "I'm standing here upstream," Alan growled back. "What's your hurry? Cool it. Get off my fucking back."

The next afternoon, at lunchtime, he bicycled down to the Couch Potato for a look at Serena Zork. Before he left, his mother served up blueberry pancakes. It was easier to eat them than explain his plan to sit at one of Serena's tables, order a hamburger and fries, survey her geography. If she hadn't ballooned to giant size, and if she'd retained a semblance of her ripe sweetness and readiness to laugh, he would reveal himself as the incarnation of Alan Bragle, returned to complete a sacred mission — a willing spawner of sound mind and body with a scrotum brimful of ready wrigglers. He would break that news slowly.

"Oh my God, Alan Bragle," Serena said the second Alan walked into the Couch Potato. He was amazed that she recognized him so quickly. It took him longer to recognize his own reflection. The way she'd phrased her greeting was probably accidental but possibly not insignificant. "Oh my God, it is you."

"Serena Zork, unbelievable. You look exactly the same as you did at Shell Island High. It's really good to see you."

"I hope I don't look the same," Serena said. "It cost me a fortune to have my breasts reduced, my nose fixed, and my teeth capped. But you do look well."

"Still perking," Alan said. "I was sorry to hear about your mother."

"Thanks," Serena said. "You could call it a blessing that she passed away. So, what have you been up to? I know you went west, what was it, to try the movie business?"

"Negative. San Francisco, not L.A., and no, I'm not queer. Actually, I did all kinds of stuff. Worked in a shoe factory. Worked the docks. Worked in a bookstore. Worked for a dry cleaner in Berkeley. Ended up in a place something like this only we catered to the tofu crowd, the stir-fried starry-eyed. And I wrote a few plays that managed to get produced. Like that."

"Me, I stayed on Shell Island," Serena said. "It just happened that way."

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"We have a lot to catch up on. Maybe we can get together some evening."

"That would be nice. I'd like that."

While Alan ate his second lunch, he watched Serena move through her waitress routines. For him, the grace of waitresses, especially the ones who worked in all-night diners, was better than classical ballet. If they had the gift of grace.

Serena Zork navigated better than she had as a teen. Maybe it was her old breasts that made her seem unbalanced, tilting like a top about to tumble. Now her posture was firm, her manner assured. If her health was good, which Alan planned to find out as discreetly as he could, Serena Zork would make a respectable consort. When she came with his check, he asked if there was anyone in her life. She told him the truth was she hadn't dated for years.

"The winter guys are, well, you know. The summer guys are, well, you know. That's all the guys I get to meet. Except for the married ones. Are you married, Alan?"

"No, not married. Not even divorced. My life was pretty hectic what with the job and the writing. I was thinking of sending away for a mail-order bride from the second or third world but postage is so damn expensive."

"I'm free on Thursdays," Serena said. "Let me cook you dinner. Nothing elaborate. You bring the wine. We'll sit around and talk."

"Sounds fine," Alan said. "Sounds delicious."

"I'll whip up my famous decaf lasagna."

"As long as no animals are hurt in the process, it's a done deal."

Alan Bragle's seduction of Serna Zork, disguised as courtship, proceeded with extreme caution. On their first evening together, after an excellent meal, they listened to Miles Davis LPs filling two decades of gaps and crevices with information edited to reveal enough but not too much about their personal lives. They shared fond memories, confessing innocent crushes and embarrassing pratfalls. Alan found himself telling Serena about his days as a Druid. She told him she'd developed a close relationship with an Egyptian goddess named Sekhmet and showed him a statuette of that lion-headed lady she kept in her bedroom.

"Never heard of her," Alan said. "Is she on the A-List?"

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"Sekhmet has an interesting resumé," Serena said. "She began as a kind of hit man for the gods, knocking off humans who broke faith. The problem was, Sekhmet began to enjoy her work too much, ripping people apart, that sort of thing. She frightened her bosses so they gave her a multiple personality as Hathor, a cow, loving, healing, and nurturing. The idea was to make her more manageable. She still goes around biting and gouging but more gently with an occasional moo. We keep in touch."

"Your guardian angel?"

"We have intimate conversations over flickering candles. You didn't know I was the spiritual type?"

"You believe in *mysterious ways*?"

"It depends on the day, but generally, yes, you could say that. Just when everything begins to seem like it's made out of plastic, I have some synchronous experience or hear about something eerie that brings back the chill. I'm pretty sure there's *something* out there."

"The Druid and the Goddess. Some pair of pagans, you and me."

Alan gave Serena a kiss on the cheek before he left.

Pedaling home, he assessed his progress. He was pretty sure that he would soon "*Spawn!*" but it would have to be spontaneous, unexpected. He doubted Serena was on the pill but she might insist on finding her diaphragm or that he wear a condom if sex was on the menu. Passion had to carry Serena past such practical considerations. He sensed that quick kindling wouldn't be easy with a woman who kept a statue of an Egyptian mafiosa near her bed.

Alan had to cope with another concern. He realized, in one of his epiphanies, that successful spawning produced spawn. After Alan fertilized, thrashed, and expired in a gush of bubbles, what would happen to the child he'd leave behind? His controlling voice never went beyond issuing its single command. There was never any discussion about bringing up baby.

Was Serena Zork the kind to face the claustrophobic world of Shell Island as a single mother? Would a woman who had her breasts reduced have any hesitation about finding a defrocked doctor ready to terminate an unwanted pregnancy? And if she had the child — a boy? — a girl? — who would pay for its upbringing? Alan planned to leave her some money but

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a waitress at the Couch Potato couldn't make enough in tips to afford pediatricians, sitters, and those midget clothes he saw in the windows of kiddie shops.

Alan wondered if he should concern himself with such things. *Mysterious ways* allowed for dismissing the mundane. Pedestrian worries might hold back an Irwin Plotnik but not an orthodox servant of the intangible. Hell, the kid would have to fend for itself.

On their second date, Alan took Serena Zork to a movie on the mainland. They did some heavy petting on the ferry coming back. Any question Alan had about her passion was answered; Serena was hungry for body contact. At her house she invited him in but he declined, making the excuse that he had to be at Nibby's to supervise a plumber early the next morning. Serena was left hurt and confused.

Alan's voice was outraged. "*SPAWN!*"

Alan assumed "*YOU MISERABLE ANAL RETENTIVE, OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE, ORALLY FIXATED, REGRESSIVE SONOFABITCH* followed after his cosmic caller hung up. But he didn't want to die that particular night. He needed at least a few more days to put his affairs in order, arrange his manuscripts, construct a bibliography and leave his parents clear instructions about finding a suitable archive for his output. He didn't want *The Collected Works of Alan Bragle (1923-1963)* dumped in the Shell Island garbage pit. His body was one thing, those pages another. The most dedicated producer didn't browse through mulch piles looking for the new Eugene O'Neill.

"You can afford to wait a few lousy days," Alan muttered to a pale Moon. "If the delay costs me points, *tant pis.*"

Three nights later, Alan ran out of excuses, kissed his mother goodbye, shook hands with his father, and went to penetrate Serena Zork.

He'd gotten to like that woman more than he wanted to and couldn't help but appreciate her obvious affection. Out of ordinary courtesy, he felt he had to let her in on his little secret before things got out of hand. He didn't want to stick Serena with his corpse in her arms, blaming her pent-up appetite for fucking her lover to death.

It was a cold night. Snowflakes dotted the air. Icicles hung like pods from barren trees. Serena had dinner simmering on the stove when Alan arrived. She'd set up a picnic on a rug near her fireplace. He popped the cork

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on a bottle of *Cliquot Brut* and the couple drank a toast to April and better weather.

Before he could tell her he had something to tell her, Serena told Alan she had something to tell him. "About making love tonight," Serena said, "I could be a disaster. I'm not talking about putting you on the spot, darling. I'm not asking for commitment. It's that I've only had one experience and it was not nice. You know Mr. Ronbork?"

"Ronbork? The name strikes a chord."

"The English teacher."

"Oh, yes, Ronbork. The one with the wig? I knew Mr. Ronbork, all right. He nearly flunked me. We argued about *Moby-Dick*. He said whaleness was...."

"Alan, I'm trying to tell you something. He raped me."

"Mr. Ronbork? He raped you? How? Where?"

"On his desk. We were going over my paper on 'The Raven.' I was talking about the various meanings of the word nevermore. He grabbed me and pulled up my skirt, tipped me over and did me. He hurt me, Alan."

"That pervert bastard. Did you tell anybody?"

"Tell who? I was too scared. The only one I told was Sekhmet. She failed me. She didn't tear out Mr. Ronbork's heart. I went home and took a bath. The water was so hot it nearly took off my skin. I was sore for a week."

"You poor child." Alan held her. He stroked her hair.

"I guess Mr. Ronbork wanted *more*," Serena said. "Anyhow, he gave me an A."

"Don't trivialize, don't demean the trauma," Alan said. "That pervert should have been barbecued. Serena, I'm so sorry you had to go through...."

"What I'm worried about is the whole idea of having sex. I want to lie naked with you, Alan, but my feelings are so mixed up. I...."

"It was a long, long time ago. A long time ago," Alan said. "Think about how many spins the Earth has taken since then. Think about what unspeakable horrors so many people have gone through in this bloody century. You're a survivor, Serena. I'm sure of that. I know you'll be fine. We can face the Ronbork troll together."

Alan Bragle felt Serena Zork go limp. He kissed her lips while he unbuttoned her blouse, fumbled with her bra strap, cupped her breasts.

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She kicked off her shoes, undid her belt buckle, slid out of her slacks, bent her legs, pulled off her socks, let Alan take off her wispy panties. "Love me," Serena said. "I'll try to be welcoming."

Before he had the chance to explain his imminent death, Alan Bragle found himself spawning. When he entered Serena his eyes flashed bolts of colored light, his body fractured to splinters, his skull became a hollowed pumpkin, his brain dissolved to sparks. He felt Serena flex at first, she tightened, then she yielded to him, thrust against him, bit at his tongue, moaned into his ear, rolled him on her belly, wrapped him in her legs, sucked his mouth dry. He felt himself burst, flow into her, his lava poured down a craggy mountain and into a steaming sea.

Then he died.

"Are you happy now?" were his last and final words.

"So happy," Serena said. "Thank you."

Alan nearly said "I wasn't talking to you, dear," but stopped himself. Something was very wrong. He was still alive. The icy San Francisco salmon swam through his mind. "*Spawn!*" Give up the ghost. That was the arrangement, practically a contract. But here was Alan Bragle, naked on the floor with Serena Zork, famished for dinner and grateful when she filled his plate.

A month later, Serena announced that she was pregnant. Alan spoke to his hidden mentor many times. "Shouldn't I be elsewhere? In a parallel universe, another dimension, some version of what's called heaven or hell? Wasn't there some kind of agreement, an implied promise? So why am I still vertical?" He got no answer but when he asked Serena to marry him, all things considered, she answered, "Yes!"

They eloped to Montauk and spent a brief honeymoon in a motel near the lighthouse that marks the continent's boundary. Eight months later, Serena Zork delivered a chubby son they named Adam Thor. Serena's obstetrician told Alan that for her age the birthing went remarkably well.

Alan worked at Nibby's Seafood Oasis alongside his wife. The restaurant thrived what with Priscilla Bragle's cooking. When Adam Thor was two, he was introduced to a new sibling, Eve Sekhmet Bragle, pink and plump.

A year later, the Bragles had another daughter, this one named Amanda for Serena's mother, and three years after that, a second son, Alan, Jr.

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Every night, Alan Bragle kissed his wife, wished her sweet dreams, then made a silent try at contacting the source of all mystery. He always asked the same question: "Shouldn't I be elsewhere? In a parallel universe, another dimension, some version of what's called heaven or hell? Wasn't there some kind of agreement, an implied promise?" Nobody home, nothing but silence.

When the twentieth century ended, Alan and Serena sold their house and moved to a new retirement complex on the far side of Shell Island. The place provided meals, medical care, and visiting entertainment. Their four children were scattered across the country, all doing reasonably well. In their turn, they'd produced twelve grandchildren who enjoyed visiting the island on major holidays and during summer vacations.

A bit uncomfortable in the twenty-first century, Alan Bragle made the best of old age. Serena was kept busy with her work on committees to preserve what was left of Shell Island's past, Alan stayed involved with the local theater group where he read his plays and gave gratuitous criticism to others. Except for restless nights when he dreamed of gossamer liaisons like his overnight with The Perk (who had to be nearly sixty, playing character parts if she'd stayed with her career) his sleep was undisturbed. He endured a triple bypass, a knee and two hip replacements. Each time he woke from anesthesia, he said, "There must be some mistake."

On the night of Alan's death, just hours before he crossed over, Serena opened a can of King Oscars and made a sardine sandwich for her husband. As a loving gesture, she cut a slice of onion for him to slip between the sardines and the lettuce. She hated the smell of onions but Alan often baited her with, "it's raw onion that makes a sandwich a sandwich," and she felt in a giving mood.

When Serena offered her sacrifice, Alan lifted the roof of toast to make room for his onion. One of the sardines raised its oily body as if it still had a head and said to Alan Bragle, "You are some kind of asshole, if you don't mind my saying so. Never, I mean never, listen to a supermarket salmon from a fish farm. They're congenital liars, the bunch of them. '*Spawn!*' That's what they tell you to do. They never left the tank, never spawned in their unnatural lives. They play a vicarious game. Whatever they say, forget about it."

Then the sardine lay down among its fellows and Alan ate it.

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Of course, Alan Bragle gave the sardine no credibility. He wrote it off as a crank, finished his dinner, lingered over a cup of tea, kissed Serena goodnight, and went to bed.

Later, when he felt his soul separate from his body and rise like a helicopter, at first he was frightened, then furious, then resigned, then expectant. He was eager to get on with it. Drifting through the Milky Way, Alan listened for a firm, if apologetic, voice saying, "Mr. Bragle, I think I can explain."

Coming Attractions

We like to mix things up around here. This month's issue featured more F than SF. Next month we've got several science fiction stories lined up.

Alex Irvine gives us a vision of the first Mars expedition as it's apt to occur in this century—as a media event.

Richard Paul Russo's "Tropical Nights at the Natatorium" presents a dark and moody tale of the future.

Newcomer Bret Bertholf's debut story, "Winterset, Iowa," extends Alfred Bester's literary legacy into this young century.

Lest you fantasy fans feel left out next month, we'll also promise you Esther Friesner's latest comic gem, a show biz story with lots of the ol' razzle-dazzle, "I Killed Them in Vegas."

With this issue in the near future and the annual October/November double issue right on its heels, now's a great time to subscribe. Check out our Website at *www.fsfmag.com* or use the reply card in this issue—you won't be disappointed!

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CURIOSITIES

THE GIRL IN A SWING, BY RICHARD ADAMS (1980)

RICHARD Adams is, of course, best known for *Watership Down*, his classic tale of anthropomorphic rabbits in search of a new home. But Adams is more than just a skillful creator of animal adventures, a fact amply demonstrated by his compelling, surprisingly erotic supernatural romance, *The Girl in a Swing*.

The narrator of this underrated novel is Alan Desland, a staid, conventional young Englishman with an inherited — and deeply repressed — psychic streak. A "sexual nonstarter," Alan has channeled his energies into his consuming passion for antique ceramics. On a business trip to Copenhagen, he meets the beautiful, enigmatic Käthe Wasserman, and that encounter changes his life.

Käthe is something Other: an embodiment of pure eroticism who seems directly descended from such pre-Christian fertility goddesses as Aphrodite and Ashtaroth. Alan succumbs to her primal power, marries her, and enters a realm of unprecedented sensual experience. This sexual idyll comes to an abrupt, tragic end when a secret from Käthe's buried past — a sin she can neither expiate nor escape — rises up, overwhelming her fragile relationship with Alan.

The Girl in a Swing is an elegant, beautifully composed novel about love and fate, guilt and punishment, Eros and death. Drawing its inspiration from such varied sources as fairy tales, classical Greek tragedy, and ancient pagan myth, it is a satisfying, deliberately ambiguous narrative whose essential erotic character is rendered with delicacy and restraint, and with a flawlessly sustained gravitas perfectly suited to the dark, allusive story that it tells.

—Bill Sheehan

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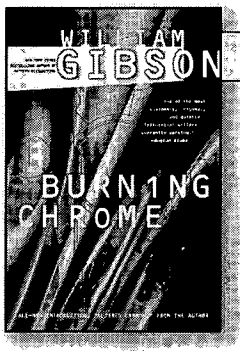

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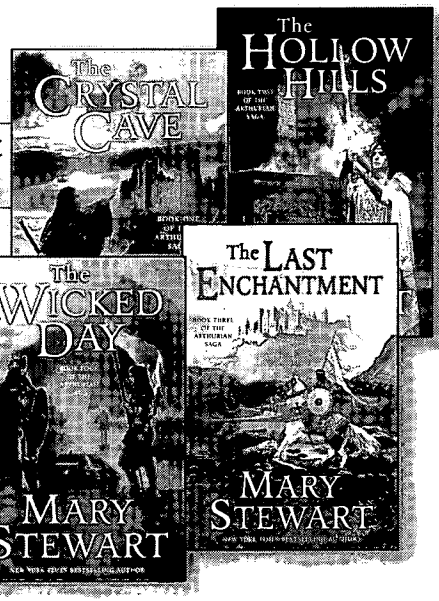

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